ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY

THE BEST WILD WEST STORIES PUBLISHED

Issued Weekly. By subscription $2.50 per year. Entered according to Act of Congress in the year 1907, in the Office of the Librarian of Congress, Washington, D. C., by STREET & SMITH, *70-80 Seventh Avenue, N. Y. Application made at the N. Y. Post Office for entry as Second-class Matter.*

No. 146 NEW YORK, FEBRUARY 2, 1907. **Price, Five Cents**

KING OF THE WILD WEST'S BROKEN CINCH

OR Stella's Stratagem

The cinch had parted, and the powerful brute, bent on Ted's destruction, seemed about to accomplish it when Stella galloped to his side, and grasping his arm held him safe.

ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY
THE BEST WILD WEST STORIES PUBLISHED

Issued Weekly. By subscription $2.50 per year. Entered according to Act of Congress in the year 1907, in the Office of the Librarian of Congress, Washington, D. C., by STREET & SMITH, *79-89 Seventh Avenue, N. Y. Application made at the N. Y. Post Office for entry as Second-class Matter.*

No. 146. NEW YORK, February 2, 1907. Price Five Cents.

King of the Wild West's Broken Cinch

OR,

STELLA'S STRATAGEM.

By NED TAYLOR.

CHAPTER I.

TALKING ABOUT SMART HOGS!

Carl Schwartz burst into the living-room of the Moon Valley Ranch-house with fire in his eye and pathos in his voice.

"As sheur as I standing here am, dot schwein I'm going to kill!"

"I'll jest bet yer a million dollars ter a piece o' custard pie yer don't," said Bud Morgan, rising from the lounge where he had been resting after a strenuous day in the big pasture.

"I'll pet you," shouted Carl. "Der pig pelongs mit me der same as you."

"Go ahead, then," said Bud, lying down again. "But I want ter tell yer this, and take it from me, it's ez straight cz an Injun's hair, yer kin kill yer own part o' thet hawg if yer want ter, but if my part dies I'll wallop yer plenty. I've spent too much time teachin' thet pig tricks ter lose it now."

"Vich part der pig you own, anyvay?"

"Ther best part; ther head."

"Den I dake der tail. By chiminy, I get skvare yet so soon. I cut der tail off, und dot vill make der pig not able to valk straight ven he can't der tail curl in der opposite direction. Den ve see how mooch der tricks he done. Vat?"

"I'll hev ther law on yer if yer interfere with thet pig."

"What's the matter with you two fellows?" asked Ted Strong, King of the Wild West, who was writing some letters at the big oak table in the center of the room.

"Der pig, he moost die," cried Carl tragically.

"Why, what has 'Oof' done now?"

"He has ate all mein gabbages," answered Carl, with almost a sob.

"Well, s'posin' he hez," said Bud. "What in thunder is cabbages fer, if they ain't ter be et by pigs?"

"Yes, you, but not fer dose kind of pig. Maybe you might eat dem und it vould be all right, but not der pig mit four feet."

Carl had a small garden back of the ranch-house, in which he had been raising cabbages, devoting all his spare time to them and good-naturedly taking the joshing the boys gave him. They were of the opinion that a cow-puncher was degrading himself by working in a garden.

"Jumpin' sand-hills, he'll be takin' up knittin' when winter comes on, an' makin' of his own socks," said Bud, in disgust.

"No, he's going in for tatting," said Ben Tremont. "He's going to make a lot of doylies for the chairs so we won't soil the satin upholstery with our oily hair."

As all the chairs in the living-room were very plain, made of solid oak, with bullhide seats and backs, this remark was received with laughter.

"Go aheadt!" said Carl. "Ven you aind't drough let me know. I know your own bizziness. Ven der vinter

comes und I haf dot deliciousness sauerkraut, und am eating it, und ven your mouts vater so dot you slobber like a colt off der clover, den—ah, den, I gifs you der ha-ha, aind't it? Den you see who der knitting und der tatting do, eh?"

Carl laughed at the thought of how the boys would miss the sauerkraut which he was going to make. But now "Oof," the pet pig of the establishment, had eaten them nearly all, and was standing in his sty too full even for the utterance of his usual lazy grunt. He looked like an animated keg of sauerkraut with four pegs at the corners for him to stand on, so full was he of Carl's cherished and esculent cabbages.

"How in the world did he get into the cabbage-patch?" asked Ted. "I thought you had made it pig-tight."

"So did I," answered Carl. "No pig but vun mit der *Teufel* inside him vould haf got der fence over."

"Got over ther fence!" snorted Bud. "Why, yer feeble-minded son of a downtrodden race, thet thar pig couldn't hev got over ther fence without a balloon. Thet fence is six feet high. A deer couldn't jump it."

"I didn't saying so. He cannot yump, dot pig. He cannot moof so full mit gabbages are he. No, he didn't yump, he yoost sving himself over mit dot fence."

"Slush! Yer gittin' plumb dotty. No pig could swing hisself over thet fence."

"But it's der only vay vat he could, und Song, der Chineser cook, saw him did it."

"You don't believe what a Chinyman tells yer, do yer?"

"What did Song say? How did the pig do it?" asked the boys, roused to interest in the squabble by this statement.

"Vell, Song he say dot he vas looking der vinder ouid und he saw der pig take der end of dot long rope vot hangs down mit der roof of der hay-house in his teeth, und he svings on it some. Song say he t'ought it vas some of Pud's foolishment he vas teaching dot pig, und didn't no more look at him for a leetle vile. Ven he looked again der pig vas svinging avay oop high by der rope. Den I coom along und see der pig in der gabbages, und I takes me a stick und vallops him goot ofer der hams, und drife him his pen into."

"Shucks! Is that all ther story. That don't prove nothin'. Thet pig, 'Oof,' is a animile of high intelligence. He wuz needin' exercise before dinner. He found a hole in ther fence, er maybe he tunneled one fer hisself, an' he wuz jest kinder doin' some gymnasium work ter git up a good appetite. Yer cain't make me believe a Chinyman, nohow."

"I don't know," said Ben thoughtfully, "pigs are mighty smart. He might have swung himself over by the rope, and if so I think he was entitled to his dinner as a reward for his ingenuity."

"I don't pay for no pig's inchenoomity mit my gabbages," said Carl hotly. "Vere I get more gabbages fer der sauerkraut, tell me dot?"

"Yer don't git no sauerkraut, that's all," growled Bud. "But speakin' about pigs bein' smart, I jest reckon they air."

"There are three animals that people persist in calling stupid when they are only strong-minded and more intelligent than the other animals," said Kit Summers, quietly breaking into the conversation.

"What air they?" asked Bud.

"The pig, the mule, and the goose," answered Kit.

"Come ter think o' it yer right ez a book," said Bud, rising from the lounge and joining the other boys in front of the fireplace. "Why, I remember oncet down on ther Pecos——"

Ben Tremont rose lazily and stretched himself.

"Well, so long, boys," he said. "If I ain't back for supper don't wait for me."

"Whar yer goin'?" asked Bud, with a black look from under his brows.

"I've got some work to do this evening, and I don't want to be getting drowsy," answered Ben, with a wink at Kit.

"Go then, yer varmint," said Bud savagely. "This yere incerdent what I'm goin' ter relate is fer intelligent persons only."

"In that case I shall have to remain," said Ben, throwing his huge bulk into a chair, that creaked like a house in a high wind.

"How about that Pecos story?" said Ted.

"'Tis erbout pigs."

"I didn't know there were any pigs down in that country," said Ted, with a sly smile.

"Oh, yes, there air. Some folks calls them peccaries, an' others alludes ter them ez wild hawgs. Yer pays yer money an' chooses what yer likes best."

"Well, what about them?"

"'Tain't noways what ye'd call much o' a story, but it 'lustrates ther intelligence o' ther hawg, which in my 'pinion ez almost ez great ez thet o' some collidge gradcoates what I hev mixed with."

Bud stopped and looked hard at Ben, who seemed to be taking a nap in his big chair.

With a snort of disgust Bud turned his back on the big fellow and began:

"Me an' 'Peep-o'-day' Thompson wuz ridin' herd on a bunch o' cattle belongin' ter ole man Bradish. All we hed ter do wuz ter keep 'em from driftin' too fur, which nat'rally left us much time fer meditation an' conversation.

"But it wa'n't long before I'd told all my stories, an' 'Peep' hed plumb fergot I'd tole them ter him, an' wuz tellin' them all over ter me, claimin' they'd happened ter him.

"I stood it fer a spell because I didn't want ter make no friction betwixt him an' me, but it made me sore jest ther same, because ther derned lump allays got ther story balled up so's I hed trouble in reconnizin' it sometimes. An' he inveribly got ther p'int o' ther story hindside fore, which made me jest bile. But when yer on a long watch with a feller, an' got ter see him from sunup ter moonrise, it's better ter overlook a lot o' things.

"Well's, I wuz sayin', we wuz on this stunt, an' had been out all o' three month, takin' turns cookin' an' watchin' so's one o' us could git erway from ther other fer a spell, an' go off an' sit down an' tell hisself what a awful chump ther other wuz, an' how yer hated him.

"We hed a chuck-wagon with us filled with flour, salt sowbelly an' saleratus, with some coffee an' a few pounds o' fine terbaccer fer makin' cigareets. I ain't sayin' nothin' erginst sowbelly ez ther national food o' ther plains an' ther staff o' life in farmin' communities, but ez a steady diet it begins ter pall when taken day in an' day out with nothin' ter wash it down with but weak coffee made outer alkali-water.

"I reckon both me an' 'Peep' wuz gittin' tired o' one

another's cookin', if ther truth wuz knowed, fer 'Peep' could make ther wust biscuit I ever et.

"My biscuit jest suited me ter a t-y ty, an' I reckon 'Peep' felt ther same way erbout his'n. Every time we set down ter vittles, if it wuz my week ter cook, 'Peep' w'd begin ter talk o' ther fine cookin' his wife uster do before she run erway with er Sant Fé conductor down ter Raton, Noo Mex. He'd tell me how she'd make beef stoo an' hot biscuit thet would melt in yer mouth. 'I don't like them kind,' sez I, one day. 'I like somethin' I kin chew on. What'd ther Lord give us teeth fer if grub is ter melt in ther mouth? No, sir; give me mine gristle an' hide. Ther tougher they be ther better I like 'em,' sez I.

"'Is thet thar meant ez a reflection on my wife?' sez 'Peep,' bristlin' up.

"'I never met yer wife,' sez I, 'an' we'll let thet part o' it pass, fer ye knows me well enough thet I never make no remarks erbout wimmin folks what ain't smooth an' complimentary. But I stands on ther gristle an' hide propersition ontil I'm ready ter fight fer it.'

"Yer see I wuz gettin' some peevish erbout 'Peep.' Ole man Bradish hed left us alone tergether too long. It ain't right fer two fellers ter camp side by each fer so long without a third party buttin' in ter break ther monotony.

"'All right,' sez he, unlimberin' his six foot three o' len'th from ther ground. 'Thet,' sez he, real dignified, 'is either a challenge er a invitation ter fight.'

"'It be,' sez I. 'Either way yer wanter take it.'

"We both riz up.

"'How d'yer want it?' sez he.

"'Please yerself,' sez I. 'Any ole holt is my fav'rite.'

"'Anythin' goes, then,' sez he, makin' a rush at me.

"Jest then we hear a turrible noise, gruntin', squealin', an' sich. We both stopped an' looked eround, an' thar stood watchin' us a big band o' wild hawgs.

"'Fresh meat!' we both hollers simultaneous. At this ther hawgs ups an' runs.

"It wuz my day off, an' hostilities stopped right thar ez I runs an' gits my rifle an' leaps my cayuse an' takes after ther hawgs, 'Peep' hollerin' after me ez friendly ez yer please.

"I chased them hawgs a couple o' miles ter ther river-bank, whar they hid in ther cane-brake. I couldn't get ther cayuse ter go in after them, so I gits down an' breaks my way in tryin' ter git a shot at one o' them, my mouth waterin' fer fresh pork so's I wuz almost wadin' in it.

"Purty soon I come in sight o' them. A ole boar wuz in charge o' them, an' he wuz a hard-lookin' citizen, I want ter tell yer. He hed tushes five inches long an' both o' 'em ez sharp ez razors. I took a shot at him, but his hide wuz so tough thet ther ball just glanced off him, an' he made a break fer me. I turned an' fled. Ther river wuz not fur erway, an' I knowed thet if I beat them hawgs ter it I wuz safe.

"I jest did it, an' waded out ez fur ez I could an' started ter swim. 'When I gits ter ther other side I'll take some long shots at yer,' thinks I, 'an' we'll hev hawg meat yit.'

"I gits out inter ther middle o' ther stream when I hears a puffin' an' a gruntin' behind me. I looks over my shoulder an' here comes ther whole herd swimmin' right after me as——"

"That settles it," said Ben, as he rose with a snort of disgust.

"What's ther matter with yer?" asked Bud calmly.

"Yer story is what I thought it would be—wild and woolly and full of cockle-burrs."

"Now is thet ag'in?"

"It's rotten. Don't you know, as long as you have been on earth, that swine cannot swim without committing suicide."

"Go ahead. Will you kindly tell us fer why, perfessor?"

"Certainly. The hoofs of pigs are so sharp, and their fore legs are set so far under their bodies, that when they attempt to swim their hoofs strike their fat throats, cutting them, and they die from loss of blood."

"Thet's c'rect, my son. Every schoolboy knows thet thar p'int in nat'ral history."

"Then why are you insulting our intelligence by stating that a herd of hogs followed you into the water and swam after you? Now don't spring any such flower of your fancy on us as to say that the hogs all killed themselves crossing and that you and 'Peep-o'-day' had all the fresh meat you wanted during the rest of your stay on the Pecos, for we won't stand for it. I don't believe there is any such thing as a Pecos, anyway."

Bud looked so crestfallen that the other boys felt sorry for him.

"You think you're smart, don't you?" said Kit, "taking Bud's finish out of his own mouth. You big chump, it wasn't your story, anyhow."

But Bud was smiling confidently, and did not seem cast down.

"Don't worry, Kit," said he. "Ben's so intellectooal thet it hurts him ter pack his knowledge eround in thet pin-head o' hiss'n. But he didn't finish ther story none. I knows ez well ez him thet hawgs can't swim fer ther reasons he give. But these yere hawgs I am tellin' erbout wuz different."

"How was that?"

"Yer see, thet thar ole boar wuz ez smart ez a copperation lawyer. He'd fixed them hawgs ter swim. First they got thar hoofs all balled up with gumbo, er sticky clay, then they worked ther dry grass inter ther clay and mixed 'em good an' stiff, lettin' 'em dry in ther sun. This made a hard ball on their toes thet jest slipped off their throats when they struck."

Ben slipped into his chair with a grunt.

"O' course I didn't know thet when I was swimmin'," continued Bud, 'an' I thinks I've run ercross a new web-footed breed o' hawgs. When we come ter ther other side I waited fer them ter land, then I turns an' swims back, ther hawgs follerin'. Back ercross I goes erg'in, an' ther pork keeps right on my trail.

"Purty soon I see they ain't swimmin' so spry, an' I allow they're gittin' some tired. Ther last time over ter our side o' ther river they come slow, an' I picks out ther kind o' pork I likes best, an' ez they land I nails what I want an' slits thar throats, an' I hev my pork. But when ther rest o' them lands they's full o' fight ez ever, an' I takes ter ther water ag'in, but they won't foller me. This seems strange, an' I looks ter see what ther matter is.

"Ther ole boar wuz mighty smart, but he'd overlooked one p'int. He'd fergot thet ther water would melt his balls o' clay, which it did, an' they couldn't swim no more. I jest stood hip-high in the water with

my Winchester an' popped erway at them until they got tired an' run off, leavin' me enough fresh pork ter start a packin'-house."

A hollow groan escaped from Ben.

"What's the use?" he moaned. "You can't beat him."

CHAPTER II.

BUD'S BAD BRONCOS.

It was time for the fall round-up, and Stella had written from her uncle's ranch, in New Mexico, that she and her aunt, Mrs. Graham, were coming North to do their winter shopping in Denver, and would visit the Moon Valley Ranch to take part in the round-up and the festivities which the boys always held at that time.

Her letter did not say when she would be there, but the boys knew her well enough to expect her at any moment following the letter.

Therefore they were not surprised to hear a clear, high imitation of the Moon Valley yell one morning while they were all sitting at the breakfast-table.

They did not need to be told that Stella Fosdick had come, and without ado they sprang from the table, overturning chairs in their haste to get out of the house to greet her and her aunt.

"Hello, boys!" she called from the carriage, in which she and Mrs. Graham had driven over from Soldier Butte. "You're a gallant lot of young fellows not to meet us at the station, particularly when I wrote you that I was coming this morning. I'm real mad." But her smiling face belied the statement.

"You didn't say when you were coming," said big Ben, who was the first to reach the carriage-step and was helping Mrs. Graham to descend. "If we had taken your general statement that you were coming, to meet you at the station we would have camped right there forever. Never can tell about your movements, young lady."

"But I did write that I was coming this morning, and to meet us and take breakfast with us in the Butte."

"We didn't get that letter. When did you write?"

"Last night."

"That's good. Always take time by the fetlock. We'll get that letter some time to-morrow. Why didn't you wait and write us to meet you after you got here?"

"Saucy as ever, Ben. But we're positively starved. Hello, Song!" she called to the Chinese cook, who was standing on the veranda grinning like a heathen idol, "got anything good to eat?"

"Yes, missee, plenty good glub. Mebbe so you likee some flied ham and eggs?" said Song, shaking hands with himself and bowing low.

"Ham and eggs! No! Positively, no! I'll be turning into a ham and egg if I get any more of it. That's all the cook at the ranch knows how to do. Anything else?"

"Yes, missee. Plenty paltridge, what Misto Ted shootee lesterday. I cookee you some plenty quick."

"All right, Song, cook us some partridges."

The boys stood around in a group of admiring servitors waiting to carry Stella's hand-bag, and gun and saddle and other things with which she was burdened.

Suddenly she looked toward the porch.

"Who's that?" she asked breathlessly, pointing to a little girl who stood shyly beside a post looking on.

"Why, that's Lilian," said Ted. "I didn't know you were up yet," he called to the little girl. "Come here, dear, and see Stella. You haven't forgotten Stella, have you?"

"If it isn't Lilian!" cried Stella, rushing toward the child with wide-open arms and folding her within them.

"I wouldn't have known you, honey," said Stella. "What have you boys been doing to her? She's improved so much. Where did you get all these clothes, and who takes care of her?"

"Ain't she a little beauty?" asked Ted Strong, King of the Wild West, proudly, patting the head of the blushing little girl.

"But how did you do it?" persisted Stella.

"Oh, I went over and saw Mrs. Bingham, the major's wife, at the fort, and asked her to come and advise us what to do. She came and was delighted with Lilian, and promised to oversee her wardrobe. She was going down to Omaha, and when she returned she had a trunk full of things for Lil. She also brought a colored woman to look after her, and Mirandy has proved a blessing and a treasure."

"But the clothes didn't make themselves."

"No, and none of us made them, either, although Bud said he could sew, and insisted upon trying. He cut up several yards of cloth, and at the end of the week, when we saw the product of his needle, he narrowly escaped lynching. If Lilian had not interceded for Uncle Bud, of whom she is very fond, I'm afraid we'd have no little Buddie now. No, we sent down to Omaha for a dressmaker and boarded her in town until she had Lil all fixed up, as becomes the heiress of the La Garita Mines."

"Who's idea is this way of making the things?" demanded Stella, who was looking Lilian over with critical eyes.

"Oh, we all had a finger in it. I sent away for a lot of fashion-magazines and things of that sort, and we sat up nights as a board of strategy and picked out the sort of thing we wanted, and I reckon there isn't a better-dressed kid in the State."

"I agree with you. Well, Ted Strong, you're a constant wonder to me. Where in the world did you learn to do all the things you do so well?"

"The honeyed flatterer. Quit your joshing Stella, hand it to Ben. He likes it, and the thicker it is the more he can stand of it."

"Hello! Bleakfast!" called Song from the veranda, and they all trooped back to the living-room to finish breakfast and talk about the things they had passed through, and to lay plans for the coming round-up festivities.

After breakfast Ted and Stella went out to the corral to look at the saddle stock.

"Why, there's old 'Calamity Jane'," cried Stella, as a bay pony came trotting across the corral and put its velvet nose in the hand she held out.

"Jane knows you, all right," said Ted.

"Sure. Why shouldn't she? I rode her all one season down here. I believe she wants me to choose her for my own again. Do you, 'Calamity,' old girl?"

"Calamity Jane," which had at one time been the wickedest and stubbornest mare on the ranch, nickered and again rubbed Stella's hand with her nose.

"Talk about your smart horses," said Stella. "'Ca-

lamity' can do everything except talk. Who's been riding her?"

"Kit. He's wrangler, and he won't let any one on her. He's light, you know, and he was saving her for you. You'll find that she hasn't been spoiled at all."

"Then, if Kit has been riding her, she's all right, for if there ever was a horseman it's Kit."

"Isn't she getting fierce?" said a quiet voice behind them. "Say, she's getting to be one of these regular society jolliers. She didn't used to be that way."

They wheeled around to see Kit, who had come up to them in his usual quiet manner.

"Yes," said Ted. "She tried to hand me a package this morning."

"You mean things. That's what a girl gets for being civil and confidential, and talking as she would like to to fellows she thinks are her friends. I'm going back to the house. I don't like you very much this morning."

The boys winked at one another.

"Say, Kit, I want Sultan after a while. I'm going to ride down to the lower end of the ranch to look at that bunch of new horses," said Ted carelessly.

"Oh, may I go with you?" asked Stella eagerly.

"I thought you were mad at us, or I would have asked you."

"I was only fooling. I'll be ready in ten minutes. Let's take Lilian with us."

"That was what I was going to do. It is time for Lilian's regular riding-lesson. I am trying to make her as good a rider and all-around cowgirl as you, Stella, but I doubt if ever she will."

"Who is jollying now, Mister Ted?" cried Stella, with a laugh, but she was blushing with pleasure at the compliment.

That is the difference between a boy and a girl. A healthy, well-conditioned boy becomes embarrassed and cross at a well-meant compliment spoken in the presence of another, believing that the person who is complimenting him is making fun of him in some unknown and covert way. But to a girl a compliment that is sincere is as grateful as dew to a rose, and Stella always felt much elated when Ted complimented her on her prowess in any of the arts of the range.

They rode away with Lilian, who was learning to ride well for her age and experience under the best of riding-teachers, the King of the Wild West.

As they were nearing the lower pasture they observed a great commotion among the horses that were huddled in a fence corner.

"Hello, what's going on there?" exclaimed Ted.

"Looks like the worst sort of a riot," said Stella. "I believe those boys need help."

They could see Bud and Ben and several cowboys circling around the bunch of ponies, evidently trying to get into it, and break it up and scatter it.

"What's the row?" asked Ted, galloping up.

"Thar's a cayuse in thar thet I'd plumb like ter electrocute," said Bud, who was mad clear through. "My, but he's got er bad dispersition."

"Which one?" asked Ted, laughing. "From what I can see there isn't one of them you could call angelic."

"Thar's ther meanest bunch o' horse-meat thet ever come ter this man's ranch, bar none, an' ther prize devil o' ther lot is thet black demon in thar. He near broke my pony's leg a minute ago with a stem-windin' kick sech ez I never see before. Thet hoss is shore double j'inted."

The horses were bunched, heads in, heels out, around a splendid-looking black stallion, which was biting and kicking at everything that came near him.

"Let him kick his foolish head off," said Ted, viewing the squealing, struggling throng.

"I reckon they're just showin' off because Stella got here this mornin'," said Bud disgustedly. "They're tryin' ter knock us, Stella, by showin' yer thet we air a bum lot o' horsemen fer not makin' them behave first off."

Stella laughed and nodded. She understood.

"Where did you pick up such a mean bunch of horses?" she asked.

"Them hosses is intended fer ther tourneymint what takes place after ther round-up. We're goin' ter hev some rough ridin' fer fair here, an' if we all git out with whole bones we shore kin send up a balloon in celebraytion."

"But where did you get them? Were they bred mean on purpose?"

"I reckon not. I bought 'em from ther wild range in Montana. They ain't seen men closer than a mile, ex-cept'n' it wuz Injuns, an' they don't count, until we butted in on' em. They belonged ter ole man Stallings. I reckon you remember him, what we met on our way ter Fort Grant, when yer run erway an' got lost on Red Mesa."

Stella nodded.

"I wuz lookin' fer a bunch o' cow-hosses. We sold a big run o' 'em ter a Newbrasky cowman who was short o' saddle stock, an' who said he'd heard we had the best broke cow-ponies in ther West, an' I reckon we had. He was willin' ter pay a good price fer our spare stock, an' we unloaded."

"Then you will have to break in a lot of new ones. Isn't that a waste of time?"

"Young woman, we're ranchmen, not rockin'-chair gents. It's part o' our business ter take somethin' what ain't much good, an' make it better. That's the way we earn our bread an' bacon."

"So I see."

"Ted says ter me ter go up inter Montana an' pick up a lot o' good gingery hosses, an' I struck John Stallings. He says ter me, when I made my wants known, 'Go out on ther range an' he'p yerself,' says he. 'They're all mine, an' Ted Strong an' his boys kin hev anythin' I've got except my fam'ly. But,' says he, 'you'll find some purty lively stock out there.'"

"Well, you did," said Stella, laughing.

"I reckon I picked out ther ornerieat hosses in the whole West, an' I'm savin' them fer some o' these smart Aleck cowboys who'll be here from ther ranches round, who think they kin ride," and he winked wisely.

"Gracious, look there!" she cried. "What's Ted trying to do. He'll be hurt, Bud."

"No, I reckon not, but I'll git in thar handy ter help him if he needs it. Keep the kid outer ther way if that bunch breaks."

Ted had done what none of the others had succeeded in doing.

He had forced his way into the very center of the bunch of wild horses, wheeling and doubling and riding like a circus performer, to avoid the batteries of flying heels, until he was close to the wicked black stallion,

which was all that held the bunch together and prevented it from being broken up and driven to the upper end of the ranch, where it belonged.

There was not a moment when he was not in danger. A chance kick might break his leg, or bring down his horse, in which event he must be kicked to death or badly hurt by being trampled on.

But so far they had not been able to reach him.

"Be careful, Ted," cried Stella.

He waved his hand at her with a smile, and she hurried Lilian beyond the reach of danger.

Ted wheeled his horse to face the black brute, which stood looking at him with wicked eyes, its ears flattened like those of a panther. In spite of its evil temper Ted admired it for its lithe beauty. It was as clean of limb as a thoroughbred, and its black skin shone like polished ebony. While he was looking at it thus it suddenly sprang at him, reared on its hind legs, striking at him like a boxer. Had he not wheeled on the instant it would have killed him. Ted was thoroughly angry, and went to the attack himself, beating the horse about the head with his quirt. When the horse rushed at him through a rain of blows across its nose Ted retreated beyond reach of its hoofs, then attacked it again.

Suddenly the black horse wheeled and presented its heels, and Ted rode around it, lashing it well, everywhere the whip could reach.

Although the horse continued to lash out with his heels he struck nothing, and always his enemy was at his side or in front.

At last Ted resolved to bring the unequal combat to an end, as Sultan was tiring of the exercise, so instead of riding around the enraged horse, he pivoted with it, keeping in front of it all the time and whipping it on the nose.

The "insurgent" stopped kicking at last and stood with drooping head, trying to shield its face from that cruel, relentless, stinging thing which the man creature wielded. He was cowed, but not conquered.

Taking advantage of the moment, Ted drove him backward and clear of his companions. Seeing their leader retreat, the other horses broke their close formation, and allowed themselves to be driven down the valley, not without an occasional rebellious kick, however.

CHAPTER III.

STELLA GOES TO THE "RENT RAG."

"Oh, joy, an' pickled pelicans!" said Bud Morgan, skipping onto the veranda one evening, when all the boys were sitting around Stella and Mrs. Graham.

Bud had just returned from Soldier Butte, where he had been spending the afternoon.

"What's devouring you now?" asked Ben Tremont. "Or is it just one of your weekly sillies?"

"Who are yer alludin' at?" asked Bud loftily.

"As you were going to say——" suggested Kit, looking at Bud.

"Boys, thar's goin' ter be a 'rent rag' in the Butte ter-morrer night, an' we all have an urgent bid ter be present."

"A what?" asked Stella.

"A 'rent rag.'"

"Who tore it?" asked Stella innocently.

At this the boys laughed loud and long, then apologized when they saw Stella's embarrassment.

"It ain't tore yet," said Bud, "but it's lierble ter be before ther rosy dawn."

"What are you talking about?" said Stella impatiently. "I never saw such provoking boys. You say such strange things, then cackle over it as though there was a joke in it, which nobody seems to see except yourselves."

"A 'rent rag' is a—'rent rag,'" said Kit, trying to explain.

"That sounds as sensible as the conundrum why is a hen," said Stella. "Must I ask the question and get caught? All right, here goes. What is a 'rent rag'? Now, for Heaven's sake, don't tell me, some one, that it is a rag that has been torn, for I exploded that one myself."

"A 'rent rag'" said Bud, slowly and carefully, "is a rag for rent. A—a—er—well, it's a——"

"Tell me, Ted," said the girl, turning to the King of the Wild West, who was leaning back in his chair smiling at the ridiculous conversation.

"Well, as near as I can make out it is a bit of slang that means this: The word 'rag' is the slang for a public dance. When a man in town who is popular enough falls behind in paying his rent, through some misfortune or other, and owes so much he cannot hope to pay it, he hangs out a flag that he wants help. In other words, it is an invitation to his friends to organize a public ball for his benefit. It depends upon his honesty and popularity whether or not they do so."

"That's the strangest thing I ever heard of."

"Well, if the thing goes through a hall is rented and music is engaged, the cost of which is to be deducted from the money taken at the door. Then the man for whose benefit the ball is given and his wife prepare a lot of sandwiches, fried chicken, and other eatables, and a tub or two of lemonade, and help their profits along."

"So that is a 'rent rag,' eh? Who is the man for whom the dance is to be given, Bud?" asked Stella.

"A feller named Martin, whose wife has been sick all summer," answered Bud. "From what they say, I reckon he's all right. Jest ter be a good feller I bought ten tickets, at one bean per ticket."

"Is that all they are?" asked Stella. "Only one bean? Gracious, they'll have to dispose of an awful lot of tickets to get enough beans to sell to pay their rent with! Why don't they make it something else? I'd like to contribute a dollar, at least. A bean a ticket, pshaw! How awfully cheap! I guess he doesn't owe much."

At this remark the boys fairly cackled.

"Now what are you laughing at?" cried Stella, almost angry. "I seem to be more humorous to-night than I ever thought possible. I can hardly say a word but you all start to laugh at me."

This was too much for the boys. They couldn't restrain themselves and went off into peals of laughter. When they saw the danger-signals of two bright spots in Stella's cheeks, they realized that they had gone too far, and all hastily tried to explain. But Ted was before them, and quietly told Stella that in the expressive, if scarcely lucid, language of the day a "bean," in the sense in which Bud had used it, meant a dollar.

"Such silly slang," said Stella, restored to good humor once more. "I don't mind slang if it's clever and reveals or conceals or twists a word in some sensible way, but a bean for a dollar—no, it won't do. The fellow who in-

vented that should try again. The only fun I can see in slang is its aptness."

The boys murmured something to the effect that it wasn't a particularly witty bit of slang, but they continued to grin at one another.

"Suppose we all go to the 'rent rag,'" said Stella suddenly. "I never saw anything of the sort and I'm crazy to go."

"It's likely to be pretty rough, and break up in a row before its natural time," said Ted.

"We'll only stay a short while," said Stella. "But I should like to do my share toward helping the poor fellow."

"It's done already. I bought ten tickets. Thet's as much ez they expect from ther Moon Valley Ranch, an' it goes inter ther running-expenses o' ther ranch, anyhow, in ther charity-account."

"I don't care, I want to go."

"I move we go," said Ben. "It will add some tone to the proceedings."

"Ben wants to air his spike-tailed coat and low-neck vest," said Kit.

"Not for me," said Ben, laughing. "I wonder what those cow-punchers and miners and gamblers would do with a chap who sauntered in there in evening dress."

"He shore would come up ter Stella's conception of a rent rag, which is a torn rag," said Kit.

"Ted, won't we go?" pleaded Stella.

"Sure, if you want to; you are our guest, and whatever you want all you have to do is to ask for it," answered Ted.

It was agreed that they should wear their every-day uniforms of khaki, and Stella was for going in her distinctive cowgirl costume, but this Mrs. Graham would not permit, and insisted that she should wear a frock which she had had made in Denver.

When, the next night, Stella walked into the living-room, where the boys were waiting to escort her and Mrs. Graham to the ball, there was a general exclamation of wonder and admiration, at which Stella hesitated with a blush, then came forward with smiling assurance.

Instead of the bold and dashing Stella in her bifurcated riding-skirt and bolero jacket, the boys saw a beautiful young woman in a pale-blue gown of silk and chiffon, with her pretty hair piled on top of her head, instead of flowing over her shoulders.

For a moment they were awed. They had never seen her so, and perhaps had never thought of her as being a young lady. Most of them were content to regard her just as Stella, their girl pard, and to-night she had given them a surprise.

At her throat was a superb sapphire set in a brooch, which had come out of the young rough riders' sapphire-mines on Yogo Creek, and in her hair was an ornament of diamonds and rubies which the boys had made from jewels which had come as their share of the treasures of the Montezumas, which they had discovered beneath the Castle of Chepultapec, in the City of Mexico.

Altogether Stella was very stunning, and in their admiration of her in this new rôle of society girl the boys were between two preferences, as she was now, and as they knew her in the saddle, throwing her lariat or handling her revolver.

Most of them, however, came to the conclusion that she was still Stella, no matter what she wore.

"Say, Stella, that's not fair," drawled Ben, "to dress up like that and make us wear our working-togs. I've got a good mind to go and get into my spike."

"If you do, I won't go," said Stella. "Unless the other boys wear theirs also. You and I would look fine going in there dressed up, and the other boys as they are now. No, I wouldn't have worn this dress if aunt hadn't insisted upon it, and this time I couldn't shake her determination. I hate it, and would much rather have my working-clothes on. But never mind, it won't be for long. How do you like me in this?" She revolved slowly before them.

"Scrumptious!" said Ben appreciatively.

"Prettier than a basket of peaches," ejaculated Kit.

"Thar ain't nothin' in art er nature what kin show up more gaudy," said Bud. "Except, mebbe, it might be a pink rose in er garden at airly mornin' with ther dew on it."

"Say, hasn't Bud got us all faded?" said Ben. "I didn't know the old sandpiper had so much poetry in his soul."

"So perfectionately lofely a younk lady nefer did I saw," exclaimed Carl, clasping his hands and holding them before him, while he rolled his eyes toward the ceiling.

"She's all thet," said Bud. "But come down ter airth. Stella ain't up among ther rafters."

Ted had said nothing, and Stella looked at him. He was regarding her attentively.

Her look said, "What do *you* think?"

He answered it with a look of admiration that satisfied her that he thought her perfect.

"I think I like you best in the every-day clothes," he said quietly. "But that gown is as if you were made for it and it was made for you."

The thought had come into Ted's mind that some day, in the far future, they would lose their girl pard, and society or duties elsewhere would claim her.

Stella understood him and agreed with him.

Soon they were ready to start for the ball. The carriage was got out and Carl volunteered to drive the horses, while the other boys rode.

Just as they were about to start Stella cried: "Where is Jack Slate? I don't see him. Isn't he coming to the ball?"

"Haven't saw him," said Bud. "I reckon he'll be moseyin' erlong after a while. We won't wait fer him. He knowed when we wuz goin' ter start."

"He came in a little while ago from the lower pasture," said Kit, "and went to his room. He said he had been thrown by his horse, and that the jar had given him a headache."

"Oh, don't let us wait for him," said Ben. "If he gets to feeling better he'll be along. You couldn't keep Jack away from a ball with an injunction."

So they proceeded to town, the boys acting as outriders to the girl, whom they were convinced would be the belle of the ball.

When they arrived at the hall in Soldier Butte they found the people flocking in, as Martin, the beneficiary, was a very popular fellow, and any man in hard luck in the West always gets all the help he needs, if he deserves it.

Ted escorted Stella into the ballroom, while Ben followed with Mrs. Graham, the other boys taking the horses around to the corral.

As Ted and Stella entered the room there was a hum

of admiration, and conversation stopped as men and women craned their necks to look at the handsome couple.

Ted was both proud and pleased, but a little bit embarrassed at the attention they received, while Stella held her head up proudly, with a look of indifference on her face, as if she had been used to admiration all her life.

The ball certainly was a mixed affair.

In one corner were a lot of army officers and their ladies.

All down the sides of the ballroom cowboys were sitting with girls from the ranches. Town girls and boys had a corner to themselves. The gamblers flocked together, and miners and others wandered here and there, mixing with cavalrymen from the fort.

When the boys returned from the corral they found that Mrs. Graham and Stella and their escorts had preempted a vacant corner.

There was a piano in the room, but no one to play it. Soon, however, a fellow dressed after the cowboy fashion entered and took a seat on a raised platform, producing a fiddle from a green bag.

A round of applause greeted him.

He tuned his instrument, and after a few preliminary scrapes began to play a monotonous tune, repeating over and over again the same few bars.

At the first scrape the cowboys and their girls leaped to the floor and began to dance, but none of the people from the fort cared to dance to such music.

Suddenly the door flew open and a band of a dozen cow-punchers walked into the room, and were greeted by joyous shouts by the other cowboys in the hall.

At their head was a handsome young fellow, slender and dark, with a resolute face and a pair of piercing eyes that flashed around the room for the purpose of seeing and locating his possible enemies.

"Who is that?" asked Stella.

"That's Billy Sudden," answered Ted.

"And who is he?"

"Foreman at 'Cow' Suggs' ranch. That's the Suggs bunch of cow-punchers. There'll be something doing here to-night."

"Why?"

"There are a lot of fellows in this part of the country who don't like Billy, and some of them are liable to tread on his feet."

"Oh, is he quarrelsome?"

"No, Billy is the best sort of a fellow, but he won't let any one hobble him. When he first went to the Dumb-bell Ranch, as the Circle-Bar Circle is called, they took him for a kid and tried to run over him. He kicked them, then fired them, and they don't like him."

"Did you see him look around the room?"

"Yes, he has every man who is likely to make trouble for him spotted and located. But we won't wait long enough to see the trouble. I never did like trouble myself."

"Well, for a chap who gets into it as often as you do——"

"What's the trouble now, over there?" interrupted Ted, looking at the door.

Around the entrance to the hall was a crowd of young town fellows led by a youth named Wiley Creviss, the son of the local banker, a dissipated and reckless young man, and a crowd of cow-punchers.

They were shoving some one here and there, making a punching-bag of him, at the same time laughing uproariously.

Just then Ted saw the head of Jack Slate in the mix-up.

"Excuse me," said Ted, turning to Stella. "Ben, take care of the ladies until I return."

He strode across the floor toward the door.

As he neared it he heard Billy Sudden say:

"Be careful, there. That is one of Ted Strong's fellows."

"I don't care if it is," said some one. "I'd give it to Strong just as hard if he was here."

"Here I am," said Ted, pushing through the crowd.

CHAPTER IV.

THE TROUBLE IS STARTED.

The crowd of men and youths opened out in front of Ted, and he strode into the circle.

There he saw Jack Slate in a much disheveled condition, dressed in his evening clothes.

Ted gasped as he stared for an instant at the youth from Boston.

He wanted to tell Jack that "it served him right," but that was not the part of loyalty, and in the presence of the enemy it did not make any difference to a young rough rider if his pard was right or wrong, if he was in need of help.

"Where is the fellow who was going to throw me around?" asked Ted, looking into the faces about him.

No one replied, although Ted waited for a moment or two before looking at Billy Sudden.

Billy winked at him, but said nothing.

"Seems as if somebody's sand has run out," said Ted contemptuously.

"Oh, I don't know," said Wiley Creviss. "There's plenty of sand left if you need any to prevent your wheels from slipping down-hill."

"No, my sand-box is always full," said Ted quietly. "But there is some sneak in this bunch who hasn't the nerve to back up his brag."

"Are you talking to me?" said Creviss, swelling up as to chest.

"Oh, are you the misguided chump whom I heard make the remark about pushing me about, as I came up?" said Ted, in a tone of surprise.

The cowboys from Suggs' ranch were snickering.

"Well, what if I was?"

"I'm going to make you try it."

"Oh, I can do it, all right."

"Well, why don't you? I'm the easiest proposition you ever saw to be hazed by a bunch of hoodlums, such as you and your pals are!"

"For two cents I'd punch your nose."

"You're too cheap. I'll give you a heap more than that if you will. It's been so long since my nose was punched that it feels sort of lonesome. I'll pay you well for the job, if you succeed in pulling off the stunt."

"You think you're the whole works because you've got a crowd of dudes around you dressed up in fake soldier clothes. You're not the only dent in the can."

Ted flushed at this allusion to his pards and the uniform, which to them was an honored institution, and which had won for them the respect of decent people and the fear of wrong-doers.

"I'll put a dent in you if you open your face to remark about this uniform again," he said, with some heat.

"See here, you town rough, you better take in your slack and clear out for home, or you'll begin to taste the sorrows that come from inexperience and bad judgment," said Billy Sudden to Creviss.

"It's up to you to mind your own business," snarled Creviss. "What are you but a lot of greasy cow-punchers. We haven't much use for your sort in this town, anyway."

"Now, son, keep quiet and behave yourself," said Billy paternally. "If you get me riled I won't be as patient with you as Ted Strong has been. I'll fix you so as to keep two doctors busy the best part of the night."

"What are you fellows butting in for, anyhow?" said Creviss angrily. "Can't this freak that comes here in a dress suit and tries to lord it over us take care of himself?"

"Surest thing you know," drawled Jack Slate. "But there are ladies here, a thing you don't seem to realize. If you'll step outside, I'd be glad to whip you right and propah."

"What's the use, Jack, of fussing with these rowdies?" said Ted. "Let it go until some other time."

"You bet," said Creviss, courage returning when he heard Ted propose peace. "I guess you'd like to let it go forever."

"That settles it," said Ted. "Go to him, Jack, and if you don't give him what's coming to him, I'll finish the job."

"Git!" said Billy Sudden, opening the door and shoving Creviss out into the street. The rest followed.

As Jack stepped into the open air he peeled off his swallow-tailed coat and threw it over Ted's arm.

He had no sooner done so than Wiley Creviss made a rush at him from the front, while one of the crowd ran in on him from the rear.

It seemed an unequal beginning, and Ted was preparing to take on the second fellow.

But Jack had seen him out of the corner of his eye, and as he came on the Boston boy stepped backward and threw his right elbow up.

It was a timely and masterly trick, for the sharp elbow caught Creviss' ally full in the nose, and he dropped like a limp rag to the ground, with a howl of anguish.

At the same moment Jack swung his left. Creviss had struck at him and missed when he backstepped, and coming on swiftly ran into Jack's fist with a thud that jarred him into a state of collapse.

"Finish him!" shouted the cow-punchers, who stood about the fighters in a circle.

"Go to him," said Ted, in a low voice. "I saw him signal his pal to tackle you from behind."

Creviss had partially recovered from the blow and was getting ready for another rush, when Jack slipped in and to one side and hit like a blacksmith at the forge.

This time Creviss went down and out.

"Hooray fer ther bantam!" shouted a big cow-puncher, slapping Jack on the back. "Say, I hear them say you're from Bosting. I'm goin' ter buy a hundred-pound sack o' beans myself ter-morrer an' begin trainin'. If beans'll do that fer you, a sack o' them will make me fit ter lick Jim Jeffries."

But Jack was busy smoothing down his ruffled hair and pulling his white lawn tie around into its proper place, and when he had put on his coat he and Ted walked into the ballroom as calmly as if they had just stepped out to view the stars.

"What was the trouble?" asked Stella, when they reached her side.

"Some town rowdies became noisy, and they were put out," answered Ted carelessly.

But Jack's dress suit was the joy of the cow-punchers, who had never seen anything like it before, although they all knew that it was the way swell men dressed for evening in the big cities.

"Say, pard," said a cowboy to Jack, as he crossed the room, "I axes yer pardon fer buttin' in, but yer lost ther front part o' yer coat-tails."

"That's all right," answered Jack. "Can't help it, don't you know. I left the blooming coat hanging on the line at home to air, and a goat came along and ate the front half of the tails off before I could get to it. I was just on my way to apologize to the master of ceremonies for it. You see, it is the only coat I have, and I was bound to come to the ball."

"Ha, ha! that's on you, 'Honk,'" laughed the cowboy's friends, who had overheard the conversation, and Jack passed on, the boys alluding to him as a "[illegible] little shrimp," for the news of his summary punishment of Creviss had got abroad.

But Jack was not through yet. He went into the men's dressing-room to leave his hat. As he was coming out he was met by a crowd of town youths, friends of Creviss. There was no one else about.

They scowled and sneered at Jack, and one of them bumped into him.

"Heah, fellah, that will do," said Jack, with his Bostonese drawl. "You're solid; you're no sponge."

"I ain't, eh?" answered the bully. "I'll tell yer, Mr. Slate, you're covered with bad marks what I don't like, an' I'm just the sponge to wipe them off."

"Step lively, then," said Jack, "for I've an engagement to dance the next waltz."

"I'll waltz you all you'll need this evenin'."

But before he had finished speaking Ben Tremont stepped around the corner.

"Hello, Jack! what is this I see?" said Ben. "Disgracing yourself by talking with these hoodlums."

"Yas, deah boy," drawled Jack. "This—er, what shall I call him? stopped me to tell me he was going to rub the marks off me, at the same time wittily making a pun on my name. I was just telling him to hurry, or I'd miss the next waltz."

"Well, I'll take the job off your hands. Stella was asking for you a moment ago."

"Yes, run along to your Stella," said the hoodlum. "I reckon she's pining for the sassiety o' another dude."

That was where he made the mistake of his life.

It didn't really make much difference what these fellows said about themselves, but the boys would not permit Stella's name to be branded about by the roughs.

So swiftly, that they didn't know what had happened to them, both Ben and Jack sailed into them.

They went sprawling like tenpins before the ball as Ben jumped in among them and mowed them down with his powerful blows, while Jack, hovering like a torpedo-boat around a battle-ship, sent in several of the telling blows Ted had taught him during the boxing-lessons at Moon Valley.

The fight was soon over, and Ben and Jack slipped quietly back into the ballroom, leaving a well-thrashed

crawd to stanch bloody noses, and [illegible] up [illegible] and [illegible] [illegible] could.

Meanwhile a diversion had been caused by the fact that the young man the "Sugar" took outin had turned toward the fiddler, who broke only one note and turned that off in [illegible], [illegible], and [illegible] [illegible] fear or favor.

The musician had been engaged because he was a friend of the boys, and had [illegible] for [illegible]. As the ball grew more and more lively the cow-punchers for the sakeage of the fiddle from the fort and Stone Valley the boys and began to [illegible] one of the fiddler, who paid no attention to them, but kept on swinging.

Suddenly there was a crash from a corner and the top of the fiddler's box was knocked off, and the playing and dancing stopped simultaneously.

There was more or less commotion, but the musician did not scream or get panic-stricken. They were used to that sort of thing.

Nobody knew who had hurled the shot, but the cow-boys and soldiers were mad clear through because there was no more music to dance by.

The crowd had moved from the part of the hall in which the coal-oil lamp situated and people affronted two slender young fellows standing on a [illegible] window, and it was presently learned Billy Sudden and Clay Whipple came calmly through the front door and joined the throng along the corridor, who said:

"Honest, fellers, I don't think we have an [illegible] a shot at that fiddle box of mine, for I never could make it work right. I know it was lousy music, but it was the best I could do."

Ted Strong, King of the Wild West, had observed the quiet entrance of Billy and Clay directly after the shooting, and he put this and that together. He knew that both of them were skilled musicians. Clay Whipple was an exceptionally good violin-player, and Ted had often heard Billy Sudden make a piano fairly sing. Evidently they had got to the point where they could stand the fiddler's music no longer, and had put a stop to it.

But for all the badness of the music the people should not be deprived of their dance.

He turned to the orchestra, who were hovering on the outskirts of the crowd, listening to the threats against and denouncing the varmints who had "shot up" the fiddler.

"Say, boys, you boneheads, I'm onto you," said Ted. "Now you've got to do the square thing. You've heard the dancers are on the music, and you've got to get in and furnish it, or I'll tell these gentlemen who plugged the fiddler's box."

"How did you get onto it?" said Clay, with a grin.

"Never mind. Is it a go?"

"I reckon I'll have to be," said Clay, looking suggestively at Billy Sudden.

"All right," said Billy.

The cow-punchers, who had come to dance with the girls from the ranches, were growing angry, and were talking what they would do to the fellow who had spoiled their fun if they caught him, when Ted Strong mounted upon the platform and holding up his hand for silence, said:

"Gentlemen, please do not get disorderly. You shall have all the dancing you want. Ladies, please be [illegible]

[illegible] Billy [illegible] Clay Whipple, as the Arizona Kings [illegible] Sudden on the Diamond Bar Ranch, will play the music and [illegible] dances. Both of them are cow-punchers, so don't [illegible] their harmonicas down, or some one will get hurt."

There was such cheering that the roof almost went off as he turned up a violin and tuned it.

Then began a lively reel as they had never heard, and in a moment the floor was covered with dancers, the officers in their uniforms, and the ladies in their light dresses, adding color to the scene. But the finest-looking couple on the floor was Stella and the King of the Wild West.

Just before the dance began Bud approached Stella, and said:

"See that gal over there? Ther's one with ther corn silk bangs? She's [illegible], an' I'm goin' ter dance thi-a's her, [illegible] Stella's ther kind of girl I admire. She's shore pretteed, an' some woman."

"Don't you know who that is?" asked Stella.

"Don't an' I don't, but I soon will. Who is she?"

"That's Sadie Gorsh, from over on the Bohemian prairie. She's rich, too!"

"I don't care nothin' about thet. She's shaped up jest about right. Taller hair, and soft as feathers. Watch me saddle."

Bud sauntered over to the girl, who was really pretty, and bit and [illegible]. Apparently he was talking his usual nonsense to her, for she smiled, then arose from her chair, and went sailing around the room, Bud's partner in the waltz, and every time they passed Ted and Stella in the waltz Bud winked at them.

Later however, he met the irate escort of the girl, when he took her back to her seat, and they glared at one another for a moment; then the escort walked off, leaving Bud master of the situation.

After this came the "sour-dough" quadrille, in which only old timers were permitted to dance, and Bud led it with Mrs. "Cap" Sturgis to the tune of "Turkey in the Straw."

But finally, as the ball was drawing to a close, Ted heard Stella utter a slight scream, and saw her trying to draw her hand away from a young fellow, whose face was turned as his.

He was across the room in an instant, and had the fellow by the shoulder and swung him around. It was Wiley Crevass, who had been drinking.

"What has this our lady done?" asked Ted.

"He insisted on dancing with me, and when I told him I wouldn't, he said he'd make me," answered Stella. "Then he caught hold of me, and I suppose I cried out, although I didn't mean to. That is what comes of keeping these citizens. If I'd had on my others, I'd have had my gun with me."

Ted had heard enough. There was a window close by, which was about ten feet above the sidewalk. Ted seized the struggling and cursing Creviss toward it, and by sheer strength lifted him to the sill and threw him out.

"I guess we've had about enough of this," he said quietly, when he returned to Stella. "No more mixed drinks in mine."

As Ted was escorting Stella to the carriage Billy Sudden tugged at his sleeve to him.

"Look out for Creviss and his bunch on the way home. They're telling around what they're going to do with you. Want any help?"

"No, I reckon not, Billy. Our bunch can take care of them."

"They are going to try to kill you to-night."

CHAPTER V.

SHOTS FROM THE DARK.

As the young rough riders swung through the streets of Soldier Butte, after leaving the ball, Ted Strong was in the lead, and Bud, Ben, Kit, and Clay were riding on either side of the carriage, while Jack Slate, with his black coat-tails flapping in the breeze, brought up the rear.

They were passing an alley, at the corner of which an electric lamp shed a path of light across the street, when a revolver-shot cracked out, and Ted's hat left his head.

The ball had just grazed his scalp, and the merest fraction of an inch lower would have killed him.

Instantly every one pulled up, and Ted, wheeling suddenly, rode at full speed for the mouth of the alley.

As he did so another shot came from the alley.

Ted's revolver was in his hand and he fired at the spot where he had seen the flash from the muzzle of the assassin's weapon.

He heard Mrs. Graham scream, and turned back to the side of the carriage only to find that one of the horses attached to it had been hit by the bullet, and was down, but that neither Stella nor Mrs. Graham had been injured, and he rode straight into the dark alley, followed by Bud and Kit, leaving Ben and the other boys to guard the carriage, for he did not know from what direction another attack might come.

The alley was as dark as a pocket, and as Ted rode into it he well knew that he was taking his life in his hands.

At the far end of the alley he heard the beat of feet running swiftly, and fired his revolver several times in that direction, and heard a yell of pain.

"Come on, fellows," he called. "I think I got one of them that time."

As he said this they saw two dark figures dart out of the alley into the street at the end opposite that at which the boys had entered, and they spurred in that direction.

But when they came to the street there was no one in sight, but splotches of blood on the sidewalk testified to the fact that a wound had been inflicted upon some one.

They rode up and down the block, but without discovering where their attackers had taken refuge.

It was a low part of the town, and there was scarcely a house on either side of the street into which a criminal would not be taken and concealed.

"We'll have to give it up," said Ted, at last. "We could hunt here all night without being any the wiser."

Disappointed they rode back, after tracing the blood-stains along the sidewalk to where they were lost in the dusty street.

They found that the carriage-horse had been so badly hurt that its recovery was impossible, and Ted mercifully put a bullet into its brain.

The carriage was surrounded by people from the dance-hall, who had been brought by the shots.

Among them was Billy Sudden.

"I reckon I called the turn," said he, as Ted came up.

"You sure did," said Ted.

"I ain't presuming to give advice none," said Billy, "but if it was me that got his sky-piece knocked off and had a horse shot I believe I'd almost be tempted to round-up this yere man's town and capture every hoodlum in it, and sweat them to find out who fired them shots."

"It wouldn't do any good, Billy," said Ted. "The people in this town have got it in for the ranch people. They think the ranches are taking trade away from them. They'd sooner see the ranches split into farms of forty acres each. They'd have so many more farmers to rob that way."

"I reckon so. But what are you going to do? I want to tell you that me and my boys stand with you till the burning pit freezes over, whenever and wherever you need us."

"May have to call on you one of these days, but not now."

"Ain't you going after that young imp, Creviss? Say, he's the meanest boy I ever saw. If I was his father I'd make him behave, or I'd bust him wide open."

"I understand his father thinks Wiley is just smart and spirited, and is ready to back him up in anything he does."

"Ought to make the old man popular."

"Not so you can see it. But that boy is a tough citizen, and getting tougher every day."

"I'm hearing a good deal about that kid these days. He trains with a bunch of bad ones over at Strongburg."

"For instance?"

"Lately he's been running with 'Skip' Riley, a crook who has the reputation of having made more money out of holding up trains than by working."

"I know his record. How long has he been there?"

"Several months. He came there from the Nebraska penitentiary, and he was smooth enough to work the reformed-criminal, first-offense racket on the women there until they finally got him a job in the fire department. He seems to be a hero in the eyes of a lot of tough young fellows here and in Strongburg, and they follow him in anything he suggests."

"That's not a healthy proposition for a boy. Mr. Riley ought to be conducted out of town."

"The worst of it is he has banded them into some sort of secret organization."

"What do they call it?"

"I did know, but I've plumb forgotten. There's a young fellow up-town whom I'm trying to keep straight on account of his folks back East. I know his sister." Ted could see Billy's face get red as he said this. "His name is Jack Farley. Perhaps you know him."

Ted shook his head.

"Well, he's a good kid, but he got into bad company at home and skipped. I correspond once in a while with his sister, and she wrote me about him, and one day I run across him in a gambling-house here. I hadn't seen him since he was a kid, but I knew him straight off because he looks so much like Kate—Miss Farley I mean—and I called him outside and had a talk with him. He was mighty uppy at first, and threw it into me so hard that I had to turn in and whale some sense into him."

"That's one way of doing it," said Ted dryly.

"It was the only way for him. He thought he'd get

[illegible]

"Sud! [illegible]"

[illegible]

"I'll keep a weather-eye out for him, never fear. Thank you for the tip. This is the first time I've heard of the boys. I've been away from the ranch [illegible] stable."

The boys had hitched Ted Slade's horse into the carriage, and he got on the seat with Carl, and they were ready to start.

With an "Adios" to Billy Sudden and his boys, they were off, and arrived at the ranch house without further incident.

Mrs. Graham and Stella had retired for the night, and the boys were sitting before the fire in the living-room, for the night was chilly, and Kit had built up a good blaze against their return.

Naturally, the conversation drifted to the shots fired at them from the alley.

"While I wuz amuskin' around ter night I overheard some conversation what wuz interestin'," remarked Ted, who was sprawling on a bearskin in front of the fire.

"What was it?" asked Ted, who had been turning over in his mind what Billy Sudden had told him of the organization of magic boys under the guidance of the excomet.

"I wuz standin' jest ter one o' the windows when I hears two fellers talkin' behind me," said Ted.

"What were they saying?"

"I wouldn't mind ter listen ter no one's private conversation, but I caught your name, an' I tried ter hear what wuz said erbout yer."

"Naturally."

"One feller wuz talkin' pritty loud, ez if he'd been hittin' up ther tangle-juice, an' ther other feller wuz tryin' ter make him put on ther soft pedal, what I've calls talkin' pianissimo. But when the liquor is in ther wit is out, an' ther feller would skip it down some for a while, then he'd get a good laughed o' ah an' boss everything in."

"What was it all about?"

"Erbout runnin' us off'n ther reservation."

"They'd have a fine chance to do that," said Ted, laughing.

"It seems they have some sort o' a club, they 'Flyin' somethin' er other'—I couldn't jest catch what. To hear them fellers talk they're holy terrors."

"How do they propose to run us off? Did you hear that?"

"No; they didn't discuss ways an' means, but they said as how ther boss, they mentioned his name, but jest clear got erway from me, hed riz up on his hind legs an' hed give it out straight to ther gang thet ez long ez we were in this country they couldn't do no good fer th[illegible] consequentially we must skiddoo, ez they need[illegible] this part of the country fer their own elbow-room. [illegible] erbout it, too."

"I suppose they thought all they had to do was to [illegible], and we'd vacate."

"Jest on thet's ther way they hed it chalked up."

"Well, that bears out what Billy Sudden told me to-night after we were shot at."

Then Ted related what Billy had told him about "Skip" Riley and his influence on the boys of Soldier Butte and Saratoburg.

"Jest thar's ther very feller they wuz talkin' erbout, thet 'Skip' Riley. Now I recolict it, an' ther name o' thet sweet-scented aggergation is ther 'Flyin' Demons.'"

"Good mercy! aren't they just awful?" said Ben, with a grin. "But which way are they expected to fly, toward you, or from you?"

"If they come monkeyin' eround these broad acres they'll be flyin' fer home," said Bud.

"Or to jail, if we can prove what I believe against them," said Ted thoughtfully.

"What is that?" asked Kit.

"You haven't forgotten the mysterious robbery of the Saratoburg Trust Company's office, have you?"

"Nope."

"You remember that a great many people to this day do believe that the office was robbed at all, because everything was found locked and barred, and the most careful examination showed that no one could have broken into the room from which a box containing twenty thousand dollars in currency and a package of negotiable bonds was stolen."

"Shore, I remember. That's allays been ther greatest mystery in these parts."

"You haven't forgotten the robbery soon afterward at the Soldier Butte post-office and the disappearance of the registered-mail pouch that came in on the train at two o'clock in the morning. It was thrown into the inner office by the carrier, and the office securely locked. Yet in the morning it could not be found, and there was nothing to show that the post-office had been entered."

"I reckon I haven't. We lost a bunch o' money in it ourselves."

"But we got it back."

"That's so, but the carrier is still in jail, awaitin' trial fer stealin' the sack, an' I don't believe he had any more ter do with it than I had."

"And yet the most careful examination by the post-office inspectors failed to show that the place had been forcibly entered, and although the carrier, Jim Bliss, had witnesses to show that he went into the post-office with the sack, and came right out without it, still he is in jail, accused of stealing it," said Kit.

"There are several other cases of mysterious robbery which I might cite, but those are enough," said Ted. "But the curious point about it all is that the robbers left not the slightest trace, not a broken lock, not a mark to show that a window was forced or a hole bored. When the place is closed up at night there is the money, when it is opened in the morning the money is gone.

And again, these robberies only occur when valuables are accidentally left out of the vaults."

"It is curious. Everything yer say is true, but I never thought erlong it ez much ez you, an' I didn't figger out how near they wuz alike."

"Well, what's your theory?" asked Ben. "You started to tell us."

"Yes, who do you think committed these robberies?" asked Kit.

"Who but a gang of bad boys under the leadership and tutelage of a criminal?" answered Ted. "Who but the gang of Strongburg and Soldier Butte young toughs who go by the silly name of 'The Flying Demons'? If they get gay around this ranch, we'll have to tie a can to them and head them for the reform school or the penitentiary."

CHAPTER VI.

THE "FLYING DEMONS'" MESSAGE.

When Ted Strong, King of the Wild West, stepped out on the veranda the morning after the ball he found Stella staring curiously at a large square piece of paper stuck on the wall of the ranch-house.

Nobody in the house had risen early, as they had all been up very late, except Song, the cook, who, when he saw that no one was disposed to turn out for an early breakfast, had gone out to work in the garden, in which he had with much skill raised an abundance of vegetables that year.

"Good morning, Stella; what is so interesting?" said Ted.

"It beats me," answered Stella. "I wonder if this is one of Ben's witticisms. If it is, he ought to be spanked."

Ted was standing by her side, reading what had been printed on the paper.

"H'm! this is good," said he, and read aloud, as if to himself, the following warning:

"Ted Strong and rough riders: You ought to know by this time that you are not wanted in this part of the country. Advise you to sell out and skip. If you stay your lives will be made a hell on earth, and we have the stuff that will do it. This is no bluff, as you will find out if you disregard this word of friendly warning. You will be given a short time to sell your stock, then git. This means business. "THE FLYING DEMONS."

"That's a pretty good effort for a lot of kids," said Ted. "Wait, here's a water-mark in the paper. Let's see what it is?"

Ted took the paper from the wall and held it up to the light.

In the paper was the representation of the fabulous monster, the griffin, and woven into the paper were the words "Griffin Bond."

"That's as easy as shooting fish in a tub," said Ted, as he folded the paper and put it in his pocket.

"The fellow who put that warning up certainly left his footprints behind him," said Stella, with a smile.

"He did, but even without that I should have known the authors of it."

"How?"

Ted then told Stella the substance of the conversation between the boys the night before, and of his suspicions as to the guilt of Creviss and his gang in the mysterious robberies that had occurred in the two towns. "But," he concluded, "it is not up to me to get at the matter. It is work for the sheriff. However, if those boys try any of their [illegible] with us we'll turn up and send them to the reform school, where they belong."

"They're certainly a bad lot. I was talking to a lady at the 'rent rag' last night, and she was telling me what a horrid boy young Creviss is."

"I wish I knew at what time this notice was put up here. It must have been done in daylight, for it was getting light in the east when we turned in."

"Perhaps some one was so quiet as to put it there while you were all inside talking."

"I hardly think so, for we were all sitting near the fireplace, and the room was so warm that Kit opened the door, and it stood open until we separated to go to bed."

"Sure you could have heard them? Some of you were talking pretty loud, for I heard you in my room just before I went to sleep."

"Well, of course, I couldn't be certain about it; but I came out on the veranda to take a look at the sky just before I turned in, and I didn't see it then. Surely, as I turned to come back into the house my eye would have caught that big piece of white paper beside the door."

"What time was it that the most important part of your conversation took place?"

"Just before we broke up. I remember we were talking over the mysterious robberies, and I expressed the opinion that they were the work of the gang under 'Skip' Riley and Creviss."

"That was probably the time the fellow who put up that notice was about. You see, if he followed you from Soldier Butte he wouldn't get here much earlier than that, for he wouldn't dare ride a pony the length of the valley at that time of the morning, so he had to walk from the south fence."

"By Jove! I believe you are right."

"If my theory is true, the fellow who brought the warning also carried back your conversation to the gang."

"Then they surely will have something to fight us on."

"Yes, fear that you will get on their trail will compel them to try to make their bluff good, as expressed in that message."

"I'd give something to know when this thing was put up."

"Let's see; it was about four o'clock when you turned in, wasn't it?"

"Just about."

"And just about that time Song gets up to cook for the boys in the bunk-house who get out to relieve the night watch in the big pasture. Doesn't he?"

"Those are the orders."

"Then have Song in, and we'll ask him if he saw a strange man around the place when he got up. He might have seen him and thought nothing of it, and would never think of reporting it."

"Good idea. Wait here and I will call him."

In a few minutes the Chinaman came shuffling in from the garden."

"See here, Song," said Ted. "Did you see a strange man here early this morning?"

"Stlange man!" said Song meditatively, with a smile

of innocence [illegible] stlange man.

"Man no b'long here," said Stella.

"Oh, yes, I savvy. No see stlange man."

"What time you get up?"

"Me gettee up fo' clock."

"Did you go outside?"

"Yes, me go out [illegible] gettee up, [illegible] No gettee up, no bleakfast."

"What did you see outside that you don't see every morning?"

"Evely moling? No savvy."

"Yesterday morning, day before that, day before that, all mornings."

"Lesterday moling, evely moling?"

"Oh, the devil! You try him, Stella."

"Say, Song, [illegible] something makee you flaid this moling?" said Stella, imitating Song's pidgin-English.

"Oh, yes, me lookee out, plenty jump in."

"What you see?"

"Plenty wolf. He sneakee lound side house. I lun like devil."

"What wolf look like?"

"Plenty big wolf. When he see me he lise up on hind legee, and lun likee man."

"Ah hah! There's your clue," said Stella, turning to Ted. "The fellow who posted this notice was disguised in a wolfskin so that he could sneak up to the house unnoticed by the Chinaman, or, if seen, he would make a bluff at scaring Song."

"Stella, you're a wonder."

"Say, Song, you no likee wolf?"

"No, me plenty flaid wolf," answered the Chinaman, shaking his head violently.

"All right, Song. I givee you shotgun. Next time you see wolf, plenty shoot. Savvy?"

"All light. You givee me gun, I shootee wolf plenty. Makee go 'ki-yi' and lun belly fast."

Song went away with a grin on his face like a crack in a piece of stale cheese.

"Stella, you've solved it. I believe whoever put that message there heard our conversation, and at least they'll hate us a bit worse than before, if that is possible."

"Let them bark, the wolves. I never was afraid of a wolf, anyhow. If you want to throw me into spasms show me a bob-cat. That's the fighting animal."

During breakfast the boys were shown the warning that had been posted beside the door, and it was decided to pay no attention to it, but to watch for the appearance of a messenger from the "Flying Demons," and if one was caught to make it hot for him.

Ted had no doubt but Creviss and his gang would try to injure the young rough riders by every means in their power, but until they committed some overt act the boys could hardly afford to become the aggressors.

For several days nothing happened, and the Moon Valley Ranch went the even tenor of its way.

Preparations were under way for the fall round-up, and Ted had received letters from several heavy stock-buyers that they would be present at that time to make their selections of such cattle as they desired to buy.

It had always been the custom at the ranch to have an entertainment of some sort at the ranch afterward. This was started for the purpose of amusing the buyers with cowboy tricks and that sort of thing, but it had developed into something far greater, until now all the world was invited to the barbecue and the "doings" afterward. No one was barred who behaved himself.

This year Ben Tremont had charge of the entertainment, and he was not limited as to expense, for every fellow was on his honor to provide the best entertainment for the least money.

The manager's plans were generally kept secret from every one except Ted and Stella, who were the exceptional ones and were in every one's secrets and confidence."

Ben had declared himself as to the superlative excellence of his show this year.

"It's going to be hard to beat," said he, in boasting about it. "We've had some pretty good shows, but nothing like the one I'm getting up now."

Kit had charge of the cowboy end of it, the races, the bronco-busting, the roping and tying contests; in fact, all the arena acts.

This year Clay Whipple attended to the inner man, and was to provide a genuine old Southern barbecue, with trimmings.

The round-up was to begin in less than a week, and the festivities were to follow immediately.

Invitations had been sent broadcast into Nebraska, Colorado, Wyoming, Idaho, Montana, and the Pacific Coast States; everywhere, in fact, where the boys had friends, and from the responses received an enormous crowd would be present.

Three days elapsed after the finding of the warning beside the door before anything more was heard from the "Flying Demons."

Then Ted found another message from them near the front door:

It was as follows:

"Ted Strong and others: You think you know who committed the mysterious robberies, but you are on the wrong track. You will never find out, while your secrets are known to us. This is warning No. 2. The third and last will come soon; then look out.

"THE FLYING DEMONS."

"Now, why in the world do they call themselves the 'Flying Demons?'" asked Ted reflectively, as they were reading the second screed from their enemies. "It seems to me that there is the secret of the whole thing. You never can tell what a pack of boys like that are going to do. They are more to be feared than older criminals, for they have no judgment, and will rush into the most reckless things just to show off before one another."

"Pay no attention to them," advised Stella. "That's what I think they are doing now—showing off. I doubt if they think they can frighten us, but they are afraid of us."

"Oh, by the way," said Ted, suddenly thinking of something. "You remember I looked at the water-mark on that first warning we received from these terrible demons. Well, this screed has the same mark—'Griffin Bond.' When I was in town to-day I went into the bank. Old man Creviss was behind the counter, and that precious son of his was beside him. I had a check cashed, and Mr. Creviss asked me why we didn't keep our bank-account there. I told him we had thought something about it, but I didn't mention that we had decided not to. Then I asked him for a couple of sheets

of paper on which to write a note, and he handed them to me. I took them to the window and held them up to the light to see the water-mark."

"And what was it?" asked Stella eagerly.

"The griffin."

"Then the paper on which these things were written came from the bank?"

"They certainly did. After I had looked at the water-mark I turned to young Creviss and looked him square in the eye. He turned as white as chalk, and his lip trembled."

"He's a coward," said Stella positively. "Why didn't he bluff it out?"

"He had nothing to stand on; but, as you say, he's a rank coward, and it's my opinion that it's only fear of 'Skip' Riley that keeps him at it, anyway. At all events, I gave him a good scare, for instead of writing the note I folded up the paper and put it into my pocket. He stepped forward as if he would interfere and make me give the paper back, not having used it, but I gave him a glassy glare and walked out."

"Then it was he who wrote the warnings."

"Of course, and he knows that I have him dead to rights. That is another mark against me with the gang."

"Better watch out."

"They can have me if they can get me."

CHAPTER VII.

SONG SHOOTS A WOLF.

Early one morning the young rough riders were startled out of their beds by the double explosion of a shotgun, followed by excited yells and screams of agony.

"That Chinaman has shot somebody," thought Ted, as he rapidly skipped out of bed and pulled on his trousers.

In the living-room he met all the boys, as scantily clad as himself, hurrying out to see what the noise was all about.

They could hear Song behind the house screaming in Chinese at the top of his voice, and in an ear-splitting falsetto, which showed that he was tremendously excited.

Thither they rushed, and for a moment the ludicrous scene far outbalanced the seriousness of what had happened.

On the ground was a young fellow about seventeen years of age. He was writhing with pain, and the blood was oozing through his clothes in fifty places.

"Ha, ha!" shrieked Song. "Me shootee wolf, turnee into man light away. Ha, ha, me allee same plenty smart man, likee magician."

"Yes, you're a hot magician," said Bud. "You've made this feller second cousin ter a porous-plaster. That's what you've done."

"Who is he, Song?" asked Ted.

"Me no savvy him. Me comee out chicken-house getee eggs fo' bleakfast. I cally gun, shotee plenty wolf all samee Mliss Stella say."

"But this is not a wolf."

"All samee wolf. I open chicken-house do'. I see wolf. Plenty glowl at Song. I no likee gun. Shutee my eye. Pull tligger, an' gun goee off. All samee wolf no mo' glowlee, him yellee like thundeh. When smokee blow way wolf gonee, all samee man comee. I plenty magician, I thinkee."

Ted looked in the chicken-house, and on the floor lay the dried hide of a big gray wolf.

Now he understood. The message had come the third time from the "Flying Demons."

"Kit, run around to the front door and see if there is a message there for us from our friends the 'Demons.'"

In a moment Kit was back, holding a piece of paper in his hand.

Ted took it from him, and read it.

It was the third and last warning.

"Ted Strong," it said, "we have warned you twice before to leave this part of the country, but you have made no move to do so. This is the third warning. If you are not away from here in a week the vengeance will fall upon you. Beware!

"THE FLYING DEMONS."

"Did you bring this?" asked Ted, of the wretched youth, who still lay upon the ground groaning from his numerous wounds.

There was no reply. The fellow could only toss his head from side to side and rub his legs, into which the bulk of the shot had been fired by the excited Chinaman.

"You won't answer, eh? Well, we'll find a way to make you. I'm glad you've given us a week," said Ted, laughing. "That will at least give us time to hold our round-up and festivities."

"Oh, if I live through this I'll never go into anything like it again," moaned the youth upon the ground.

"Here, stand up," said Ted to him. "You're not badly hurt. You're only stung, twice. Get on your feet and we'll see what we can do for you. You're a long way from dead yet. What's your name?"

"Jack Farley. Oh, if I could only be sure that I wasn't going to die!" exclaimed the youth.

He was the young fellow Billy Sudden had spoken about.

"We can't tell how badly you are hurt until you get up," said Ted. "Rise, and we'll go into the house and examine your wounds."

Slowly young Farley got to his feet, but when he tried to walk he uttered a howl of pain, and sank down again.

"Yellow all through," said Ben, in a tone of disgust.

"Ever have about three ounces of duck-shot pumped inter yer system through yer hide?" asked Bud.

"Never had."

"Then yer don't know all ther joys o' life. I've had one ounce shot inter my leg, an' if ther contents o' two shells gives double ther pain one does, then excuse me. An' mine wuz only snipe-shot, at that."

"Pick him up, boys, and lay him on the lounge in my room," said Ted. "I'll take a look at him after a while, meantime some of you watch him to see that he doesn't get away. We need him for evidence."

When Bud and Ben had carried the wounded boy into Ted's room and laid him on the lounge, Bud stood over him regarding him with interest.

"I sorter envy yer, kid," he said at last.

"You can have 'em, but I don't see why you envy me," said Farley.

"I wuz thinkin' how happy you'll be all through these lonesome winter evenings, pickin' there shot out o' yer legs."

When Farley had been carried into the house, Ted called Kit to him and said:

"Kit, I wish you'd ride over to Suggs' ranch and tell Billy Sudden that his protégé is over here with his hide peppered with bird-shot, and ask him to ride over and take a look at him."

During breakfast they related to Stella the story of Song's wolf-hunt in the chicken-house, and the result.

Song was as proud as a peacock, and wore "the smile that won't come off" as he flitted around the table waiting on every one.

"Say, Missee Stella," he said, "Song all samee one cowblov now, eh? What you savee?"

"Yes, Song, you have certainly followed instructions. You got your wolf that time, sure. How you likee shootee?"

"No likee, Missee Stella. Makee too much noisee, all samee too much plenty fahclackers. Kickee like blazes. Plitty near knockee arm outee Song."

The boys stripped Farley after breakfast, and found his legs in pretty bad condition. They looked as if Song's gun had been loaded with smallpox, and all of it had lodged in the lad's legs.

"Boys, we'll have to take relays in picking the shot from our first victim," said Ted. "There's too much work here for one man."

"He's a turrible-lookin' demon now with a hide full o' shot. Ther punctured demon of Demonville! Say, kid, I'd hate ter laugh at yer, but yer a sight. Why didn't yer fix it so's them two charges o' shot would hev been distributed among ther gang? Then yer could sit down o' evenings an' pick shot out o' one another instid o' plottin' agin' ther whites."

"Let him be, Bud, he's having all he can do to think about these shots, as it is. The thing for us to do now is to pick them out of him."

"We'll let him count 'em ez they come out. That'll help take his mind off his troubles, but he'll hev ter hev a great head fer figgers."

They went to work on him with their penknives, as most of the shot were just beneath the skin. But it was painful enough, at that, and every time a shot came out Farley groaned deeper. While they were engaged in this pleasing occupation, Billy Sudden arrived.

"Hello, kid," he said to Farley. "So you got it at last. I could have told you to keep away from Ted Strong and his bunch. They're bad medicine for a herd o' mavericks like you to graze with. You tackled the wrong outfit. They're too many fer you, and if you'll all take a fool's advice you'll keep away, or else some of you will be looking through a griddle in a door up at the penitentiary."

Farley made no reply, only hid his face and groaned at every extracted shot.

"Say, kid, what about this gang you belong to?"

The boy shook his head.

"D'ye mean to say you're not going to tell me about it?"

The boy nodded.

"What's the reason you won't?"

"The oath."

"Slush with the oath. You had no business to take it. What'll the home folks think when I tell them about this. Shot by a Chinaman in the chicken-house at dawn!"

Billy paused to let the ignominy of it sink in. It did sound pretty bad and mean and cheap. There were no heroics in this, such as Farley had at first considered his rôle.

He hid his face on his arm, and his body shook. Billy had probed deep into his pride.

"Well, come on," said Billy. "This is no time for a conspirator to do the baby-act. I suppose you thought it was to be a spot-light scene where you stood in the center doing the heavy stunt, and all the rest sat on the bleachers and applauded. By gee! Peppered by a Chinaman, and with snipe-shot, at that."

"Oh, quit it!" said Farley. "I know I was a chump for sticking with those fellows, but I needed the money."

"What money?"

"My share of the——"

"What?"

"Oh, nothing."

"Yes, there is something. What robbery was it you shared in?"

"I didn't steal anything."

"I suppose not. You did the dirty work of being lookout, or something like that, and they threw you the bone while they kept the meat and fat, eh?"

"What shall I do with him?" asked Ted.

"Keep him locked up as a hostage. That may bring those young fools to their senses," said Billy. "I'm disgusted with him for not making a clean breast of the whole foolish business, and if it wasn't for his sister I'd toss him up in the air and forget him."

The rest of the day was spent in picking shot out of Farley, and by evening he was relieved of the last one.

"We'll put him in that empty room at the corner of the house, and take turns watching him through the night," said Ted.

Until bedtime Farley sat in the living-room with the rest of them, and they were unusually guarded in their conversation.

When it came time to retire Farley was conducted to the room which was to be his prison, and it fell to Carl to take the first watch, and to call Ben at one o'clock.

In the room there was a lounge and a pair of blankets for Farley, a table and a lamp, and a chair for the watch.

"Whatever you do, don't go to sleep, Carl," said Ted. "The reason I'm putting you on the first watch is because you're such a sleepy head."

"Don'd vorry aboud me," said Carl, with a yawn. "I bade you I vas der sleepinglessness feller in der whole bunch. If he gets avay on my vatch it vill not be pecause I don'd sleep."

"I guess you mean all right, but I swear I can't understand you. Only keep awake."

"Oh, yah; I avake keeping all der time."

Carl sat in the chair watching his prisoner, and soon saw Farley's chest heaving regularly and heard his deep breathing as he slept. Then things seemed to waver and fade away.

Carl started up at hearing some one beating on the door, and sat rubbing his eyes. It was broad daylight.

"All right, I'll get up pooty soon yet. Is preakfast retty?"

"Here, open the door. This is Ted."

"Vait a minute."

Carl staggered sleepily to the door and unlocked it.

"Where is your prisoner?" asked Ted, stalking into the room, and looking at the open window.

"My vat? *Ach, Gott in Himmel,* vat haf I dided?

I am schoost coming avake. He iss gone! I haf slept on vatch. I am foreffer disgraced. Kill me, Ted! I haf no appetite to live any more alretty," cried Carl.

Ted had been angry at discovering the escape of Farley, for he had conceived a plan to use him against Creviss. He had risen early, and when he found that all the boys were in bed except Carl, he immeditely suspected the truth.

But Carl's despairing manner turned him from anger.

"Never mind, Carl," he said. "It was my fault for putting you on watch. You were not cut out for a watchman. Or, perhaps, you were, according to the funny papers, but not of prisoners."

During breakfast Carl was compelled to endure the jokes of the boys at his failure to guard the prisoner, which he did with a lugubrious countenance, then, at a signal from Ted, the subject was dropped.

About ten o'clock Billy Sudden rode up to the ranch-house.

There was something in his manner that betokened news of importance, and he strode unbidden into the living-room, where Ted was sitting at his desk.

"Where's the kid?" he asked abruptly.

"Who, Farley?" asked Ted, looking up from his work.

"Yes."

"Skipped."

"What?"

"I said skipped."

"Great Scott! I'd give a hundred dollars if he hadn't."

"Why?"

"What time did he get away?"

"Don't know, exactly. Carl was watching him, but he fell asleep almost as soon as they were in the room together, and didn't wake up until six o'clock this morning, and Farley was gone. No one knows how he got away or at what time. It might have been any time. He probably woke up in the night and saw that Carl was dead to the world, and opened the window, dropped to the ground, and hit the trail. That's all I know about it. But what makes you so anxious about it?"

"Then you haven't heard the news?"

"Guess not. What is it?"

"The First National Bank was robbed last night."

"Great guns! Creviss' bank! That's the United States depository!"

"The same."

"What are the details?"

"I rode through town this morning on my way over here to see if being confined for the night wouldn't make the kid talk, when I saw a bunch of men standing in front of the bank. I butted in and asked what the excitement was, and they told me that the bank had been robbed."

"But how?"

"That's what nobody knows. When the cashier, Mr. Henson, got to the bank this morning everything apparently was all right. The doors and windows were fastened, and there was no sign anywhere that the bank had been forcibly entered. Of course he didn't look at these things first. He went to the vault and opened it at the proper time and examined its contents casually. Everything seemed to be as usual. But when, a few minutes later, he went to get out the currency, it was all gone. He hadn't counted up when I left there, so no one knows the exact amount, but it was large."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE BATTLE WITH THE BULL.

The excitement incident to the mysterious robbery of the Creviss bank was intense.

How had it been done? This was the question that every one was asking his neighbor. But none could answer it.

The evening before the robbery had taken place the bank had been closed by the cashier, and by Mr. Creviss himself.

The money, books, and papers, with which the business of the day had been conducted, had been carried into the vault by the cashier, and Mr. Creviss, who was an unusually cautious man, looked into the vault after the cashier came out, to see that everything was in. Then he closed the vault doors, and turned the handle of the combination, setting the time-lock, thus securing the doors from being opened until nine o'clock the next morning.

The only way in which it could be opened, and an almost impossible way, at that, was by blowing it open.

And yet the vault had been robbed, and the vault lock had apparently not been tampered with.

It had the appearance of necromancy.

Ted rode into town with Billy Sudden, arriving about noon.

Billy rode on to the Dumb-bell Ranch, and Ted stopped at the bank. It seemed deserted. But as he entered the door he saw a big man, dressed in the flashy clothes affected by managers of cheap circuses and fake shows, standing at the end of the counter talking to Wiley Creviss.

"I can't do anything with that check," Ted heard Creviss say. "You'll have to come in when the cashier is here. The safe is locked, and I can't get into it, anyway, and all the currency is in it. I'm only staying here until the cashier gets back from dinner."

"When will that be?" asked the stranger.

"In about half an hour."

The stranger picked up his valise, which seemed to be heavy, and walked out grumbling about banks that closed up for dinner.

Ted said nothing to Wiley, but he took a good look about the bank, disregarding the other lad's scowls.

He observed that the vault door stood open, but that there was no money in sight, and the place had an air of desertion, as if business was slack.

When the King of the Wild West had seen all that he wanted of the apparent entrances to the bank that a criminal might use to force his way in, he left with two distinct impressions on his mind. One was that the vault door had been open when he came in, and that Wiley Creviss had abruptly closed it when he saw Ted staring at it. The other was the remarkable appearance of the showman, for without doubt he was that.

As before, the mysterious robbery of the bank proved to be too hard a nut for the citizens to crack, and when they had thrashed out all the theories advanced and knocked them to pieces again, they forgot it.

Not so Ted Strong. This succession of robberies, none of them leaving behind the slightest clue to the perpetrators, interested him. Its very difficulty of solution, which had made the lesser brains abandon it, compelled his attention and interest.

Had it been his business to tackle the problem, he

gladly would have done so. [illegible] Federal end to it was the robbery of the [illegible] which the inspectors of the department were working on. [illegible] hope it might be found that the [illegible] government for general purposes at Fort Benton had been stolen. [illegible] would come under the operations of the United States marshal's office.

But other and more pressing things of a personal nature gradually took his attention from crime, and he devoted himself to the coming round-up.

All the spare room in the Moon Valley Ranch-house was occupied by visiting cattle-buyers, who had come to the round-up. The rooms of the boys had been given up to guests, while they camped on the prairie behind the house.

At last the great day came.

Early in the morning the boys were out, and with them was Stella.

"Cow" Suggs had loaned Ted his outfit for the day, and Ted was glad to have the boys, for there was no greater success in the country at a round-up, saving Ted himself, who was longed for by them all, and so conceded, from the start, to be [illegible], Billy Sudden, who had been through [illegible] and had traveled in Europe before he started [illegible] for the toil, freedom, and excitement of the range.

It was now time to round up all the stock on the Moon Valley Range, cut out the marketable stock, and brand the yearlings.

This is not only a troublesome task, but it is dangerous, and [illegible] of the time until the task is accomplished but has its exciting adventures and [illegible] [illegible].

The boys did not know exactly how many head of cattle they [illegible]. They had been selling and replenishing their stock from time to time, and the increase of calves had been very large, for Moon Valley, situated in the lee of Dent du Chien, or Dog Tooth Mountain, with its rich grass, the richest in the Black Hills, and its abundance of fresh, clear spring-water, was an ideal breeding-place.

There were on the ranch at that time several dangerous bulls, and this added to the hard work of the day, because the monarchs of the range did not like to be disturbed, and have their following broken up and scattered.

In the big pasture, which lay at the foot of Dent du Chien Mountain, was the largest herd in the valley.

The king of this herd was known as "Gladiator." He was always looking for a fight, and never refused a challenge, whether from another bull or from what he considered his natural enemy, man.

A man on foot by chance would have stood no more chance for his life than if he tried to stand in front of the engine that hauls the Limited State Express going at top speed. Gladiator would kill him just as quickly and as surely.

So it was that strangers were kept out of the big pasture, whether they were mounted or not, unless they were escorted by some member of the young rough rider organization or one of the older cowboys about the place. Stella, with her red bolero, nearly caused a tragedy one day by coming within the vision of Gladiator, who took the bolero for a challenge.

Stella turned in time and fled, and had it not been for the fleetness of her pony and her own superb riding, there would been no more to relate of the adventures of the girl and of the Moon Valley boy.

The morning of the round-up Ted undertook personally to turn the herd to the rendezvous.

Stella insisted upon accompanying him, and at last he was persuaded to give his consent, but only on the condition that she wear subdued colors, which she did, with skirt and jacket of a light dun color.

The herd was grazing in the noble range that stretched for miles along and across the valley in the shadow of the splendid mountain.

It was widely scattered, and as the band of horsemen rode out toward it the cattle lifted their heads for a moment and took a quiet survey, then returned to their feeding.

Not so Gladiator.

The great white-and-black bull raised his head proudly, and his fierce, steady eyes regarded them without fear.

Indeed, Gladiator knew no fear, whether of man or beast, wolf pack or mountain-lion, serpent or bird of prey.

He was monarch of that herd, and no one said him nay except the King of the Wild West, who ruled the ranch and all that was on it, by the general consent of his comrades and his own fitness for his rulership.

Ted and Gladiator had had numerous differences, and it was the bull that had backed down every time.

Yet he did not fear Ted. Rather he hated him because he could not conquer this quick, brave, and resourceful fellow.

"That bull will be the death of you some of these days," said Stella to Ted once when Gladiator, resenting Ted's intrusion into the herd for the purpose of cutting out some calves, charged him. But Ted in the end threw the bull with his rope, humiliating him before all the herd. From that time forth Gladiator's eyes always became red with anger when he saw Ted, but he did not misbehave, because he respected Ted's lariat and quirt, and the strong arm that wielded them.

When they got to the herd the boys circled it from behind, riding in slowly.

Ted and Stella were on the left point, with Bud and Kit opposite.

Billy Sudden was in the rear to drive, while the other rough riders and Billy Sudden's boys came in from the sides.

At the first interruption of their grazing the cattle moved along sluggishly, but Gladiator did not move.

The big bull stood his ground, with eyes gazing steadily at Ted and Stella, who were approaching him slowly and persistently.

Suddenly Gladiator threw up his head and gave a low, menacing bellow.

"The old chap is waking up," said Ted.

"Be careful, Ted," said Stella. "He's not in very good humor."

"I see he isn't. But if we go at him easily he'll be all right."

"Don't take any chances with him alone, Ted."

"Still I'm not going to let him boss this job. He's got to lead this herd out, and that's all there is to it, for it's a cinch that they won't go without him."

Stella knew that it was useless to say anything more, as when Ted made up his mind to do a thing it would be done if everything broke.

Billy Sudden had got the herd moving up from the rear, but the forward end of the herd was stagnant.

Gladiator refused to budge, and stood with his stubborn fore feet planted on the sod, his head raised insolently.

But it could be seen that his anger was working within him, and would soon break forth.

Bud was working the cattle nearest him gently on the move, but when they saw that their leader was standing still they ceased their progress and began to crowd and mill, and the steers were getting reckless and beginning to throw their tails in the air and utter low, growling bellows.

It was a critical moment. Who was to be the master must be decided quickly. If the bull conquered then the cattle would get to milling generally, and the mischief would be to pay.

It would not take long for them to stampede, if the bull started the panic, or made a charge. The King of the Wild West saw the danger, and knew that the condition must be treated diplomatically, which was the easier way, or with force, of which the outcome was most uncertain.

It depended, in a measure, on the temper of the bull himself.

The cattle were crowding up from the rear, and those nearest the bull were beginning to feel the pressure and were pushing toward Gladiator, who was fifteen feet in advance of the herd.

When he noticed that the herd was moving, his anger increased, and he lowered his head and began to paw the ground.

Ted held up his hand to Billy Sudden as a signal to cease pushing the animals, but they had got the impetus and would not stop.

In a moment they had begun to crowd upon the bull, who, with legs planted stubbornly, would not be crowded, and began to gore aside those who were being pushed upon him.

Ted saw instantly that this was going to result in disaster if not stopped, as the frightened steers, feeling Gladiator's sharp horns, turned back on the herd, and were pushing their way frantically into the center of it, while others, coming up, were forced upon the bull's horns.

"Darn a stubborn bull, anyhow!" exclaimed Ted. "I've got to get in and put a stop to that, or Gladiator will have the herd to milling or running in less than ten minutes."

"Be careful," was all Stella said, but there was a world of anxiety in her voice.

"You better get out of the way, Stella," said Ted. "Ride to the rear. You will see it all, and have just as much fun, and will be out of danger."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to make that bull move along or bust a string."

Ted's jaw was set with determination, and when Stella saw that she knew that it would be useless for her to say anything more.

Ted loosened his rope, grasped his quirt firmly, and rode slowly toward the bull, while Stella signaled to Billy Sudden to ride up to the head of the herd.

The boys, observing Ted's actions, knew what he was about to do, and ceased moving the cattle and sat on their horses to watch for the outcome of the contest.

Most of them felt like spectators at a performance of a specially hazardous feat, and held their breath. But each was on the alert to rush to Ted's assistance the moment he seemed to need it.

As the bull looked up, and saw Ted approaching him, he ceased pawing, and stood with watchful eyes. Occasionally he sent forth a challenging bellow. His tail was switching from side to side, like that of an angry cat.

Ted was coming alertly. No one knew the danger of openly attacking the bull better than himself, and yet it must be done.

It was rule or kill, so far as the bull was concerned, for if the boys could not manage him they would be compelled to kill him so that they might be able to handle the herd, substituting a more amiable bull in his place.

A cowman cannot always tell what a bull is going to do when it is faced on the range. It may dodge the issue or it may attack, and Ted was wary enough to be on the watch for the latter contingency.

Therefore when Gladiator, without so much warning as the lowering of his head, sprang at Ted when he was not more than ten feet away, he covered the distance in two or three lumbering bounds, and Ted had just sufficient time to wheel his pony to one side to avoid being bowled over. But the horns of the bull struck the gaiter on his left leg, as it rushed past, and tore it off, almost unseating him. Stella, breathlessly watching the encounter, gasped as she saw Ted reel in his saddle. But she breathed easier as she saw him straighten up and turn his horse rapidly to face the bull again.

With almost incredible agility, the bull turned and came rushing at Ted again, but the King of the Wild West rode swiftly away from him, tolling him away from the herd.

Finally the bull stopped and began to paw the earth. Ted, to tempt him to another attack, directed Sultan toward him at full speed, intending to swerve when he got close to his bullship, and dodge him and infuriate him further, so that he would follow. He knew that Sultan could outrun Gladiator.

But, as he got close to the bull, in spite of the warning cries from Stella and Bud, Gladiator swerved to meet the attack, and before the fleet-footed pony could escape he was struck, and went rolling over the ground.

A cry of horror went up from the boys as they all dashed to the scene. Ted Strong was on the ground. The pony had scrambled to his feet, and stood trembling a few feet distant. The bull, with lowered head, was charging upon Ted.

CHAPTER IX.

TED GETS AN ASSIGNMENT.

To the horror-stricken onlookers it appeared that Ted's end had come. He lay prone upon the sod with his face turned to the sky, evidently stunned.

The bull, with all the ferocity of his kind when goaded to anger, was charging upon him, his needle-like horns a few inches from the ground, and the foam flecking from his lips.

Stella, her face white and drawn, was galloping toward him as fast as her pony could go, while Bud was lashing his pony to the height of its speed as he crossed

the face of the bull. [illegible] Sudden was neck and neck with Stella, calling to her to hold back.

Suddenly Ted Strong came to life, and looked over his shoulder.

He saw his danger and quick as thought he rolled over, away from the bull.

But that was all. Even one could see that a minute was too good. He could not expect to escape from the infuriated beast in that manner, and a fearful groan escaped the lips of more than one.

Ted surely was doomed.

The bull's horns caught Ted in the side as he continued to roll away from it, and it stopped for an instant, settling itself to toss him. Stella turned her head away with a muttered prayer, and even the cowboys, used to accidents in the round-up, gasped.

But suddenly they saw a cloud of dust fly upward, and thought at first that Ted had fired his revolver into the face of the infuriated beast, and it seemed strange that they had not heard the report of the weapon.

Upon attempt of rejoicing the bull, with a snort of pain, threw up its head, and Ted was not impaled upon its horns.

There was another cloud of dust, and the bull began backing away, slowly but surely, shaking its head, as if in pain.

"Screamin' catamounts, did yer see that, Stella?" cried Bud Morgan, as he rode alongside the girl.

"What did he do?" asked Stella.

"He's saved hisself by blindin' ther bull. He throwed dust inter its eyes. I'm dinged if I see how thet feller kin think o' things like thet when he's down an' out. Look at him!"

As the bull rubbed its face in the grass Ted rolled over twice, then leaped to his feet and ran to where Sultan was awaiting him.

A mighty cheer went up from the boys, and the color came back into Stella's face with a rush, but she could not have uttered a sound to save her life.

In the meantime the bull had recovered, having rubbed the dust from its eyes in the short grass, and looked about for its prey.

It caught sight of Ted in the act of mounting, and sprang toward him with the swiftness of a deer.

Then Stella recovered her voice.

"Run, Ted! Run!" she cried.

But Ted had seen the necessity of that himself, and whistled Sultan and dashed out, looking over his shoulder at the enraged monster that was following him, while he rapidly uncoiled his lariat.

Having run several hundred yards and encouraged the bull, he turned and stopped with his rope in his hand, slowly calculating the animal's distance and speed.

Bud and Stella were following the bull closely, both of them preparing their lariats for the throw.

As the bull charged, Ted's rope was seen to leave his hand and go sailing through the air in graceful loops and curves that lengthened out one after the other.

The end the rope struck [illegible] a successful cast make with a lariat was that which Ted attempted. He had to calculate to a degree the speed with which the bull was advancing toward him, and that at which the rope was leaving him. To calculate the point where the two would come together would seem an almost impossible task.

But so nicely had Ted estimated it, that the open noose fell over the bull's head and settled down, and, turning swiftly, Ted spurred Sultan to one side, and the bull, shaking his head and emitting short, angry bellows, neared pack.

The bull's pace had suddenly come to a step, bracing himself for the shock, and when Gladiator came to the end of the rope he turned completely over, and fell to the back with a thud that shook the earth.

Ted had galloped forward, and was about to throw himself from the saddle to tie the brute, when, with the agility of a cat, the bull was on its feet, shaking its head and stamping the earth in a perfect fury of anger and desperation. But it was by no means beaten, and ran at Bud, who took to his heels. When again it arrived at the end of the rope, it went head over heels, much to its loss of wind and dignity.

This time it did not rise so briskly, and Ted gave it all the time it wanted.

Suddenly Stella dashed out and rode toward the bull, and when a few feet from it curved off, with the angry brute in full pursuit. Had her pony stumbled it would have been all up with her, for Gladiator was wild with rage, and when it was again thrown its fury knew no bounds.

"A few more throws like that will settle him, I think," shouted Ted. "Bait him again, Bud."

Again Bud rode out, and the bull took after him as before, and when he was jerked onto his back by the rope he lay there.

Ted rode rapidly up to him, and, detaching a rope which had been knotted around his waist, tied the bull's legs fore and aft, and the exhausted brute did not make an objection.

For several minutes the bull lay panting, then it recovered.

When it came to its normal condition at last, it struggled furjously to get to its feet, but each time it got up Ted forced it to its side, standing close to it so that it could see him.

Time and again it thus fruitlessly struggled.

It seemed to realize suddenly that it had been a very foolish bull, and that it had met its master, who now stood over him ready to tumble him over at any moment.

So he lay quite still, following Ted's movements with its great dark eyes, out of which all the ferocity had vanished.

Ted stepped up to it and patted its head, and it made no objection to these attentions. Then he began to untie the bonds that held its legs together.

"Look out fer him, he's treacherous," called Bud.

"He's all right," answered Ted. "I'll bet he'll eat out of my hand."

When it felt that it was free again, the bull got slowly to his feet and walked sedately in the direction of the herd.

"You've broken the spirit of that bull," said Stella.

"You bet I have," said Ted. "That's just what he needed. He'll be a good bull now. If he isn't, I'll give him some more."

Ted now rode to the head of the herd with Stella, and the other boys took their places."

"All right, Bill. Send them forward," shouted Ted to the rear of the herd.

Slowly Ted set the herd to moving toward the south, where the other herds were gathering under the management of the boys.

At first Gladiator threw up his head arrogantly, and did not stir.

Ted again rode toward him, swinging his lariat. The bull saw him as well as the rope, and, recognizing the agents of his defeat, moved off briskly at the head of the herd.

"Say," said Bud, across the head of the herd, "yer could slap that old duffer across the face with your hat, and he'd apologize."

They were almost at the rendezvous, where thousands of cattle had been gathered into a huge herd, and in every direction could be seen dust clouds announcing that others were on the way.

"Here comes Carl hot foot," said Stella. "He looks as if something had happened, and he was an extra edition with 'a full account of the terrible disaster.'"

"Hello, Carl! what is it?" asked Ted.

"Ther United States marshal vaiting for you on der veranda iss," answered Carl solemnly.

"Well, what do I care?" asked Ted. "He's come at a mighty busy time if he just wants to swap a little conversation. Did he say what he wanted?"

"No, but he say it is very important vor. an' for you to hurry."

"My compliments to the marshal, and tell him I'm busy, and will see him as soon as I get through. You entertain him for a while."

"But he der boss iss."

"Not on this ranch. This is a free and unadulterated republic, where there are no bosses. Tell him to make himself at home, and I'll be there as soon as I can."

Now the cattle were all rounded up, and the cutting out of the two and three-year-olds began.

This was intensely exciting work, in which Stella joined, as she was as skilled at it as any of the boys. Outside of the big herd, the cowboys were picking up the cut-outs and driving them to the branding-pens, for many of them were acquired stock, and even many of the home yearlings had never been branded.

Then the cows with calves were cut out, so that the youngsters might get a touch of life by feeling the sting of the hot iron with the Crescent V brand on it.

The buyers were circulating in the herds, looking over the stock.

Several of the buyers had brought their own cowpunchers with them, and these went to work cutting out the selections of their employers.

The sky was thick with dust, and the air rang with the shouts of the cowboys and the lowing and bellowing of the cattle.

The rattle of countless hoofs on the hard soil added to the din, and the cattle weaving in and out ceaselessly, and the dashing riding of the cowboys as they swooped out of the mass occasionaly to drive back an escaping steer, made a scene of excitement, movement, and noise never seen anywhere, except at a Western cattle round-up and cut-out.

Soon the work was pretty well in hand, and, leaving Bud Morgan as segundo, Ted went to the house to see the marshal.

He found that officer sitting on the veranda, quietly smoking a cigar, an interested witness of the proceedings.

"How are you, Mr. Easton?" said Ted, shaking hands with the marshal. "I must apologize for not coming sooner, but my hands were full."

"So I see," said the marshal cordially. "I was watching you work out there. Say, I believe I'd like to be a cow-puncher if I wasn't so old."

"It's a young man's job," said Ted, laughing; "and even at that it is about all a young fellow can stand at times. But this to-day is a mere picnic to what we are up against sometimes."

"Well, you seem to be right in it."

"Yes, I love my business. I wouldn't be anything in the world except a cow-puncher."

"But, remember, you are also a government officer."

"I never forget that. But, if it came to being compelled to quit one or the other of the occupations, I'd still be a cow-puncher, and let the marshalship go."

"That's the very thing I came to see about."

"You want my resignation?" asked Ted, his spirits falling to zero.

"By no means," laughed the marshal. "Not that, but to ask you to undertake a somewhat difficult job. It transpires that when the Soldier Butte bank was robbed the other night, a large amount of money belonging to the government was taken. I didn't know this until early this afternoon, when I received a telegram from Washington to go after the robbers and land them."

"That'll be somewhat of a job," said Ted, drawing his chair closer to the marshal, so that he couldn't be overheard by passing people.

"I'm well aware of that, and that's the reason I come to you. You and your boys must undertake the duty of clearing up the mystery of the robbery, and, if possible, recovering the money."

"I have a very probable theory as to who the robbers are, but it will be entirely another matter to fasten it on them."

"I leave it all to you. I don't want to have anything to do with it. All I want are results."

"But I shall not have time to tackle it for a day or two. Unfortunately our fall round-up is in progress, and, as this is the time we sell the product of our business, we can't leave it until everything is cleared up."

"That's all right, Mr. Strong. But when you do get busy, don't come back home until you land the thieves."

CHAPTER X.

A VISITOR IN THE NIGHT.

A great deal of money changed hands that day. The stock-buyers had their wallets loaded with cash when they came a-buying, for, when they had cut out the cattle they wanted, and the price was struck, they were prepared to drive them off at once.

The sales at the round-up had been large, and Ted and the boys sat up late that night, after those guests who had elected to remain over for the festivities of the next day were safely in bed, counting the money and going over the books.

"It has been a mighty good year for us, boys," said Ted, as he contemplated the total of their sales.

"Yes, and, best of all, it leaves us with all the old stock disposed of, and nothing but young and vigorous animals with which to begin building up again," said Kit, who had a great head for the cattle business and a faculty for seeing into the future.

"What air we goin' ter do with all this yere mazuma?"

asked Bud, looking over the stacks of fifties, twenties, tens, and fives that lay on the table around which they were sitting in the living-room, and which was flanked by piles of gold and a few hundred-dollar bills.

"Can't get it into the bank until day after to-morrow," said Ted. "We'll be too busy to-morrow looking after our guests, and I don't suppose we'll be free until after the dance to-morrow night. Still, I'm not worrying about it. We know everybody here to-night, and I'll take care of it till we can ride over to Strongburg and bank it."

Just then the door blew open with a bang, and big Ben scurried in, bringing with him a blast of prairie wind, crisp and chill from the mountain, that scattered the greenbacks all over the room, and two or three of the fives were blown into the fire and incinerated before any one could rescue them.

"Close that door, you big stiff!" shouted Bud, grasping frantically at the money that was capering over the top of the table.

Ben closed the door with a slam that shook the house.

"'A fool and his money is soon parted,'" quoted Ben, when he saw the havoc wrought by the wind.

"You bet," said Kit. "Three fives blew into the fireplace, and are no more. We'll just charge them to your account."

"Like dolly, you will!" said Ben.

"If it hadn't been for you they wouldn't be there. What's the reason we won't?"

"Because you won't. I didn't make the wind."

"No, but consarn ye, ye let it in, an' ye're an accessory before er after ther fact. I reckon both," said Bud.

"Let it go, boys," said Ted. "Pick up the bills, and we'll count and stack them again."

"Where have you been, anyway?" asked Kit, addressing Ben.

"Down beddin' my show for the night. They're about all in now. All except the music, which will be here in the morning," replied Ben. "I'm not at all stuck on myself, but——"

"Oh, no, you've got a very poor opinion of yourself, I guess," said Kit.

"But I want to say that I think I got the bunkiedoodelest show that ever paced the glimmering, gleaming, gloaming grass of Moon Valley."

"Listen to the hombre explode," said Bud. "He's tryin' ter be a feeble imitation o' a real showman. I'll bet he shows up ter-morrer like a ring-master in a sucuss, with high, shiny boots an' a long whip an' a tall, slick hat, an' crack his whip an' say: 'What will ther leetle lady hev next?'"

Ben blushed, for his ambitions in the show line, now that he had had a taste of it, had really been in that direction, only he wouldn't have had the boys know it for the world.

"How about the show, anyhow, Ben?" asked Ted. "What have you got? You might as well let us know now."

"Not on your autobiography," answered Ben haughtily. "I want to say, though, that your eyes will bulge like the knobs on a wash-stand drawer when you see what I've got, and then come to look at the bill for such a stupendous, striking, and singularly successful aggregation of freaks, acts, and divertisements embodied in this colossal and cataclasmic congregation of——"

"Oh, cheese it," said Kit. "You give me the pip."

"All right, have it your own way," sighed Ben. "This is what a fellow gets for serving his country, from Thomas Jefferson to John D. Rockefeller."

"Come on," said Ted persuasively. "Loosen up and tell us what we are to have to-morrow. This is an executive session of the whole."

"You're like a lot of kids the day before Christmas. You've just got to see what mama's hidden in the closet," said Ben. "Well, I'll let you in on a little of it."

"Shoot when you're ready," said Kit.

"I was over at Strongburg about a month ago, and, knowing that I'd have to rustle up a show soon, I wrote to a theatrical agent in Chicago to let me know if he could furnish me with a good amusement company at small cost. He wrote me that he had the very thing, and offered me one of these bum 'wild west' shows, with a bunch of spavined ponies, a lot of imitation cowboys, fake Indians, and Coney Island target-shooters."

"An' yer didn't take 'em?" asked Bud, in surprise.

"Tush! Well, I was up against it, when Morrison, the hotel man, told me that there was a showman in town, and perhaps I might get something out of him.

"I hunted him up. He was a typical showman. Big fellow, large as a Noah's ark, dressed like a sunset, and loud as an eighteen-inch gun."

"I saw the fellow in Soldier Butte the other day. He was talking to Wiley Creviss in the bank," said Ted. "You've described him more picturesquely than I should, but I'm convinced he's the same man."

"I asked him what he had, and he told me he could furnish me on short notice anything from a three-ring circus to a hand-organ and monkey," continued Ben. "I told him how much money I wanted to spend, and he said he'd fix me up a show that would make everybody delighted, and I told him to go ahead. The show blew in to-night, and ran up their tents down near the corral."

"How many have you got in it?"

"I've got a balloon ascension for the afternoon, a giant and a midget, a magician, an Egyptian fortune-teller, a trick-mule, a Circassian beauty, and a strong man." Ben looked around proudly, and the boys burst into peals of laughter.

"Have you scraped the mold off of them yet?" asked Kit.

"How's that?" asked Ben haughtily.

"Have you pulled the burrs off the chestnuts?"

"See here, what do you mean? Are you casting aspersions on my show?"

"Not exactly, but I think you've been stung by some old stranded side-show that was taking the tie route back home. Circassian beut! Ho-ho! likewise ha-ha! and some more."

"Ter say nothin' o' a Egyptian fortune-teller from Popodunk, Ioway, an' a wild man from ther Quaker village. Oh! give me ther smellin'-salts. I'm goin' ter hev ther histrikes," laughed Bud.

"Haf you not got a echukated vooly pig und a feller vot 'eats 'em alife'?" asked Carl.

"That's right, Dutchy. It's a bum show what ain't got them," laughed Bud.

The boys were laughing until the house rang with it, and Stella poked her pretty head out of the door to ask to be told the joke. Bud complied, with many humorous embellishments.

"Don't pay any attention to them, Ben," said Stella,

sympathetically. "I'll take in the show from start to finish."

"Could friendship go any farther than that?" asked Kit pathetically.

"Oh, you fellows give me a pain," said Ben, rising and stalking off to bed.

He was soon followed by the others, Ted and Kit remaining behind to gather up the money and slip rubber bands around each of the packages of currency.

"We ought to have a safe in the house, Ted," said Kit, looking over the pile of money. We often have large sums of money in the house, and some time we might get robbed."

"There's not much danger of that, Kit," answered Ted. "There are not many fellows who would have the nerve to come into this house. Too many guns, and too many fellows who are not afraid to shoot them. I'm not afraid."

"What was that?"

Kit was staring at the rear window.

"What?"

"I just looked up and thought I saw a face at the window."

"You're getting imaginative."

Just then the clock struck twelve.

"No, I don't think so. I heard a slight cracking noise and looked up. Something white appeared at the window for an instant. It looked like the face of a child."

"Nonsense. A child couldn't look through that window. It's seven feet from the ground."

"Well, I suppose I was mistaken. Let's hide that money and go to bed."

"Where shall we put it?"

Kit looked around the room, then smiled.

"Why, in the cubby-hole, of course. There's a safe for you. We haven't used it for so long that I'd almost forgotten it."

"The very thing. Nobody'd find it there in a blue moon."

They crossed over to a corner of the room and threw back the corner of a rug. Where the baseboard was mortised at the corner there appeared to have been a patch put in. Ted placed his hand against this, near the top, and it tipped back. It was hung on a pivot, and, as its top went in and the bottom came out, there was revealed a boxlike receptacle about two feet long and six inches deep.

"This is a bully place," said Ted, placing the packages of money within it. "It is known to only five of us, and I'll bet that most of us have forgotten its very existence."

The board was turned back into place and the rug spread out again.

"Safe as in the Strongburg Bank," said Kit. "Well, me for the feathers. We're going to be kept humping to-morrow. *Buenas noches.*"

In a few minutes the big ranch-house was dark and quiet; every person in it was sound asleep.

Ted Strong had sunk into a deep and untroubled sleep, for his day had been very active, and he was tired when he lay down.

But he had not been sleeping more than a half-hour when he found himself sitting straight up in bed, very wide-awake, and wondering why.

"Something wrong in the house," he muttered to himself.

He sniffed the air to discover the smell of smoke. But it was not that.

Had he locked up? He went over his actions just before retiring, and was sure that he had attended faithfully to everything.

The money! The thought came to him like a blow.

Something had happened to the money.

He was out of bed in a jiffy and slipped into his trousers, and, grabbing his revolver from beneath his pillow, he opened the door and walked softly along the hall in his bare feet.

The hall opened into the living-room through an arch in which a portière, made of small pieces of bamboo strung together, was hung.

As he looked cautiously into the living-room his elbow struck this, and it rattled sharply in the stillness.

He had heard a faint creak, and, as he peeped around the corner of the arch, he saw dimly the figure of a man near the door, evidently just in the act of opening it.

With a succession of noiseless leaps Ted was across the room, and arrived at the door just as it swung open and the man was about to depart.

But Ted was upon his back with the swiftness of a bob-cat, and they came together to the floor with a crash.

The burglar was beneath, but this did not prevent him from fighting with a desperation that lent strength to his already strong and lithe body.

He was slenderer and younger than Ted, who could feel it in the fellow's build as they struggled.

"Let me out, or I'll kill you," said the burglar, and Ted saw the flash of a knife.

At the same moment something rushed past them in the dark, and out of the door.

As Ted saw it dimly it was small, and its motions were awkward and lumbering. He thought it was a dog, and was about to raise his revolver to fire at it when he thought better of it, as he did not want to arouse the household if he could conquer his man without making a noise.

"Don't shoot," said the man, who had observed Ted's motion with the gun.

At this extraordinary request Ted paused.

He had twisted the man's wrist until he dropped the knife, and then shoved it beyond reach with the muzzle of his revolver.

His strong left hand was in the nape of the fellow's neck, and Ted had his nose ground into the rug. He had found a gun in the fellow's hip pocket, and relieved him of it.

Then Ted rose, and told his captive to get up.

Slowly he did so, and Ted made him move to the center of the room.

Bud's golden head appeared around the corner of the doorway.

Ted could just distinguish it.

"Who's that?" asked Bud.

"It's I, Bud. Come in and strike a light. I've caught something."

In a moment a light flared up.

"Jack Farley!" exclaimed Ted, in astonishment.

"Yes, blast you, Jack Farley," replied the youth.

"Couldn't keep away, eh?"

"A feller'd think thet once was enough," said Bud.

"I couldn't help myself. I had to come," growled Farley.

"Well, this time you'll stay. You sha'n't abuse our hospitality again. Bud, get a rope and tie our friend. He's skittish, and is likely to run away if he's turned loose."

Farley was soon tied securely.

"Keep an eye on him, Bud," said Ted. "I want to look over the premises."

Ted went directly to the corner and pushed back the pivot door, struck a match, and looked into the box.

It was empty.

Then, turning back to Farley, he searched him thoroughly.

There was no money in his pockets.

Ted called up Kit, and the three of them ransacked the living-room thoroughly, but not a dollar could be found. "What did you do with the money you stole from that hole?" said Ted, gazing fiercely into Farley's eyes.

"I haven't seen a dollar of it," was the reply.

CHAPTER XI.

TED STRONG HAS A THEORY.

After Farley had been securely locked up in a storeroom without windows they went to bed, feeling secure that there would be no further attempt to enter the house that night.

At breakfast they discussed the robbery after their guests had left the house.

"I don't understand what became of the money," said Ted. "It looks to me like one of those mysterious robberies, and the capture of Farley puts it up to the Riley and Creviss gang. Now that we've been touched personally we will take some interest in the gang, and I have a large crayon picture of about a dozen hitherto respectable young fellows learning useful trades in a reformatory institution."

"But that doesn't bring back our money, neither does it tell us how it was stolen or what became of it," said Ben.

"I can't get a thing out of Farley," said Ted. "I tackled him this morning as soon as I got up, but he wouldn't open his mouth. My belief is that he is in deadly fear of some one, probably 'Skip' Riley."

"Well, we've got him where the hair is short, anyway," said Kit. "He was caught in the act, and will come out of prison an older and a wiser man."

"What else besides Farley did you see in the room, Ted?" asked Stella.

"I really couldn't say what it was," said Ted. "It was dark, and there was only the faintest kind of light outside from the stars. The room was perfectly dark. I was sitting on Farley's back holding him down. He had thrown the door open, and we were in the doorway, but there was a space between us and the door-jamb.

"Suddenly I heard a faint noise beside me and could just see something scud past me on to the veranda."

"What did it look like?"

"It was about as high as a small dog, only shorter and thicker than a dog, and ran with a clumsy, heavy, sideways motion."

"Are you sure it was a dog?"

"No, I'm not sure, for I didn't see it plainly. All I could see was that it looked like some kind of an animal, but just what kind I couldn't determine."

"Your description would lead me to believe that it was a coon."

"No, I don't think it was a coon, or I would have been able to distinguish it by its smell."

"I didn't know but that it might be a coon trained to steal and sneak out. I've heard of such things, and it is by no means impossible, for you know that coons, like crows, are natural-born thieves."

"By Jove, that gives me an idea. I think it was a dog, and that its strange gait was due to the fact that the money had been tied upon him so that he would get away with it in case Farley was caught."

"No, the dog theory is wrong. What about a trained monkey?" Stella looked around the table to see how this was taken.

"C'rect!" shouted Bud. "Stella, yer struck ther problem a solar plexus thet time."

"That does seem reasonable, and if it is true it solves the mysterious robberies of the Strongburg Trust Company's office, the post-office, and Creviss' bank," said Ted.

"It's worth looking into, anyway," said Ben. "Now I wonder if there is such a thing as a trained monkey in my marvelous and magnificent gathering of the splendors of the Orient out there. By Jove, I'm going through that camp with a fine-tooth comb, and if I find a monk, I'll habeas corpus him, and we'll hang him to the rafters."

"Well, mum's the word about the money," warned Ted. "We don't want this thing to leak out. If it does there's a chance against us."

Although they all felt pretty blue about the loss of the money, they had nothing but hearty welcomes and smiles for their guests, who began to arrive from all parts of the county, and from far-distant States and Territories, to help rejoice with the boys for a prosperous year, not knowing that all the prosperity had fallen into the hands of thieves.

The grounds about the ranch-house had been gaily decorated for the occasion. An enormous American flag flapped and snapped in the fresh breeze from the top of a tall staff in front of the house, and the Belle Fourche band was playing in a gaily decorated stand. The showmen had erected their tents, and already the boys and girls from the ranches and towns were going in and out, witnessing the wonders to be beheld in them.

Stella was receiving her girl guests on the veranda, for she was a great favorite among the cowgirls in the country on account of her friendliness and unaffected ways.

Mrs. Graham was welcoming the older women, while Ted and Jack Slate were shaking hands with the ranchmen and cowboys.

Clay's fires were going well, and the steer and sheep were being roasted for the noontime feast.

Ben had gone on a still hunt among the tents belonging to the showman, and, while he found three small dogs, there was no sign of a monkey, and by adroit questioning he learned that they had had a monkey, but that it had died at Leadville, because the air in that altitude was too cold and rare for it.

These facts he communicated to Ted, and seemed to explode the monkey-thief theory.

During the morning there was a baseball-game between the cowboys and the clerks from the stores in Soldier Butte and Strongburg, in which the score was

forty-one to three in favor of the clerks. The cowboys couldn't play ball any more than a rabbit, encumbered as they were by their chaps, high-heeled boots, and spurs. It took a home-run hit to get one of them to first base.

After dinner the cowboy sports were to come off.

When Ted could get away from his duties as host for a few minutes he sauntered through the crowd, extending greetings to all whom he knew, but at the same time keeping a close watch over everything.

The theft of the money from the cubby-hole had aroused in him all his detective instincts.

He saw two or three of the young fellows who had been with Wiley Creviss the night of the ball, but he paid no attention to them. They were welcome to come to the festivities, and to remain so long as they behaved themselves.

But he determined to have them watched.

Soon he came upon some more of the Creviss gang and saw them mingle with several boys, whom he knew to be tough characters, from Strongburg.

"The clan is gathering," he said to himself. "We're likely to have trouble with those fellows before the day is over. I'll put Bud next to them, and have the boys watch them."

"Who do you suppose I saw just now?"

It was Stella's voice, and she was standing at his elbow.

"Who?" he asked.

"Wiley Creviss."

"Is that so? I have been watching for him to come along. A lot of his fellows are here, and they are sticking pretty well together. Where did you see him?"

"I told Ben I'd take in his show even if no one else did, and I've kept my promise. When I was in that biggest tent I suddenly came upon Creviss in close conversation with the boss showman. When they saw me looking at them they separated in a hurry, and Creviss left the tent."

"H'm! I wonder if Ben knows this fellow who owns the show."

"Don't know, I'm sure. It wouldn't be a bad scheme to find out something about him in view of the robbery last night."

"You're right, Stella. Another thing I've been thinging about. I've been looking for 'Skip' Riley, the Strongburg fireman, the supposed leader of the 'Flying Demons.' If they are going to try any of their monkey-business to-day he ought to be here."

"Haven't you heard the news? I intended to tell you, but must have forgotten. The last time I was in Strongburg I heard that Riley had resigned, and left the town for the East."

"I hadn't heard it. Then that puts it up to Creviss."

"But who is the fellow who runs the show? Ben says his name is Colonel Ben Robinson, and that he is an old circusman down on his luck temporarily."

"Look around and find out what you can. They will not suspect you if you ask questions as they would me. If you find out anything let me know."

"All right, Ted, I'll circulate, and report."

Ted wandered over to the show tents, and entered them all, with kindly greetings to the performers, who all knew him as the King of the Wild West, and asked him if they could be excused from performing while the riding and other cowboy stunts were going forward, and Ted told them to lay off if they wanted to, as most of the guests would be out in the grand stand, anyhow.

In the last tent he entered he found the strong man lifting weights against a lot of husky cow-punchers, and the giant and midget.

But it was the midget that struck him most forcibly. He had a sly, cunning face and a bad eye, and when Ted came in he tried to hide behind the giant, who picked him up as one would a baby in arms. But the little fellow wriggled free and climbed down the big man like a monkey down a tree. Then he slipped across to the middle of the tent and shinned up the pole to the top, and hung there, looking down at Ted.

"What's the matter with the little fellow?" Ted asked the giant.

"Oh, he ain't got real good sense," rumbled the giant. "His brain stopped growing with his body, I reckon. But you can teach him tricks the same as you can a dog or a monkey, and he'll do them all right. I reckon he's afraid of you. He is of some people, the boss in particular."

"How long have you been with the boss?"

"Not very long. He just took the show over from the old boss a month ago. We were going to pieces over to Cheyenne, and he come along and bought us. He's been a showman in his time, but says he hasn't been in the biz for several years. He knows the biz, though, and has scads of money. We are well fed and get our salaries regular. Him and Prince Carl, that's the midget, are great pals. The midget sleeps in his tent, and the boss seldom lets him out of his sight."

"Say, Bellows, how many times have I got to tell you not to stand there gassing with patrons of the show. Every one don't want to bother with your theories and troubles." Ted turned, to face the boss showman.

"Oh, it's you, Mr. Strong?" he went on. "I didn't recognize your back. It's all right to talk to you. But I've got to call the giant down once in so often for taking up people's time, for he's an awful gabber."

He walked away, but when Ted tried to get the giant to tell him some more about the midget and the boss, he would not say a word.

But the giant had planted the seed of a theory in Ted's mind.

Presently Ted saw Stella beckoning to him in the crowd, and forced his way to her side.

She took his arm, and they got out of the crowd. Ted saw that she had something to communicate.

"Well?" he said, smiling down on her.

"There's going to be something doing here," said she. "The boss showman has been talking with several of the gang."

"All right. Did you hear anything about 'Skip' Riley?"

"Yes. He's been gone from Strongburg about a month."

"Learn anything else about him?"

"'Skip' Riley is not his name at all."

"That so? What is it? Did you learn?"

"I was talking to a lady from Strongburg, one of those who got him a job on the fire department."

"What did she know about him?"

"She said that she was appointed a committee of one by the Ladies' Aid Society over there to look up the new fireman's career."

"And I suppose she ran on to some hot stuff?"

"It seems that the ex-convict, 'Skip 'Riley, had been a circus performer once upon a time, before he took to being a burglar."

"Was burglary the crime for which he was put in prison?"

"Yes, so she says. He was an aeronaut and acrobat."

"Good! And what was his stage-name? Did she say?"

"Robinson—Ben Robinson. She says that she was told that he was quite famous in his day as a circus performer, but that he couldn't resist the temptation to steal, and so had to quit the business, as none of the circus proprietors would have him around."

"Did she say where she got this information?"

"Yes. It was sent to her by the warden of the penitentiary in which Riley was confined before he came to Strongburg."

"Then her information is probably correct. Stella, thanks to you, we've got them dead to rights. We've solved the mystery hanging around all these recent robberies."

"Nearly, but not quite. How were they accomplished?"

"That I don't know positively, but I have a theory which I believe will turn out to be correct."

"But about Riley?"

"Ben Robinson, the proprietor of this show, and 'Skip' Riley, burglar and ex-convict, are one and the same man."

CHAPTER XII.

ALOFT AFTER A PRISONER.

"All ready for the big show," cried Kit, riding up to Ted. "When will we begin the sports?"

Ted looked over the grand stand, which was built around an arena in which the cowboy sports were to come off.

This was the most important event of the day, for while bronco-busting and cattle-roping are a cowboy's business, yet he finds unending amusement in doing these same things if his girl and friends are there to witness his skill.

After some ordinary feats of [illegible] by the girls and cowboys, several really dangerous events were turned loose in the arena, and for several minutes a very fair imitation of a Spanish bull-fight, minus the killing of the animals, took place.

After several of the steers had been roped, thrown, and tied, there still remained in the arena a sullen and difficult brute, which was as tricky as a rat, and the boys gave him up one at a time.

"Why don't you give the girls a chance at him?" shouted a cowgirl derisively, from the seats.

"Any girl who wants to tackle him is at liberty to do so," Ted shouted back through his megaphone.

Instantly three girls leaped into the arena, and borrowed ponies from their cowboy acquaintances.

Ted motioned to Sophy Cozak, the pretty and buxom girl from the Bohemian prairie, whom Bud had admired at the dance, she rode forward on Bud's own particular horse, Ranger.

Sophy had several brothers who had taught her the cow business, and she had few equals on the range.

As she rode out she was greeted with a round of applause from her admirers. She gathered up her rope and put the horse forward at an easy lope toward the steer, which looked at her a moment and trotted off.

Sophy followed him, and made three casts of the rope, and every time the brute dodged it, and the rope fell to the ground.

That settled it with Sophy, and she rode in, and another girl took her place. She, too, was unsuccessful, as was the third, and the audience was distinctly disappointed.

"Ladies and gentlemen," cried Ted, through the megaphone. "It was not the intention of any one living on the Moon Valley Ranch to take part in these contests, but if there are no other young ladies in the grand stand who would like to try their ropes on the steer, we can produce one whom we think can rope and tie it at the first trial. I refer to Miss Stella Fosdick. I have not consulted her wishes in the matter, but will ask her if she will undertake it."

At this a wild cheer went up, and Ted dashed out of the arena to find Stella. In a moment he was back, and announced that Miss Fosdick would try it.

Presently Stella rode in on Custer at a hard gallop, gathering up her rope as she rode. There was a sort of [illegible] self-confidence in her manner that captivated the [illegible], and the cheers split the air.

Stella rode straight at the steer, which, seeing her approach, galloped down the arena with her in pursuit.

Swinging her rope above her head, she chased it back until it was about in the middle of the field, and suddenly the rope left her hand unerringly and shot through the air, seemed to hesitate for an instant, then fell over the steer's head.

Custer came to a stop the moment the rope left her hand, with his body well braced. The steer went to the end of the rope as fast as it could go, then was flung in the air, and lay upon his back sprawling like some ridiculous four-legged crab, while the girl leaped from her saddle, ran swiftly across the intervening space, tied his legs together, and held up her hand.

The crowd fairly went wild with enthusiasm at her feat, as she mounted again, leaving the steer to the tender mercies of the cow-punchers, who flocked about her. Then she dashed out of the arena, waving her hat in recognition of the applause.

Then the bunch of wild Montana horses, which never had felt the saddle, were driven in, and Ted offered a twenty-dollar gold piece to any puncher who could rope, saddle and bridle, and ride one of the broncos ten minutes without being thrown.

"Easy money!" shouted the cowboys, flocking into the arena.

The black, which had caused Ted so much trouble when the bunch first came to the ranch, was not with them. He was considered too dangerous an animal to be handled at an entertainment where there were so many women and children.

Only two cow-punchers succeeded in even getting their saddles on the broncos without throwing them and hog-tying them, and only one, Billy Sudden, stayed the required ten minutes, and he said afterward that it wasn't his fault, because the bronco wouldn't let him get off.

Ted then announced that there was another animal in the herd that he would ask no man to ride, but that he would try to do so himself.

Another great cheer went up as Ted rode away after

the black demon, to whom the boys had given the name Lucifer, for his supposed resemblance to his satanic majesty.

But it was found impossible to drive Lucifer into the arena.

"Never mind," said Ted, "we'll throw the saddle on him here, and I'll ride him in."

A crowd of men and boys was standing around, and Ted removed his saddle and handed it to a young fellow in the crowd to hold until he had thrown Lucifer. The animal was standing in the center of the circle, his wary eyes taking in the crowd, and letting fly with his heels at the approach of any one.

"Now, Bud," called Ted; "ride in on him and rope him. You, Kit, get him by the leg and throw him, and I'll slip a bridle on him."

It was not much of a trick to rope and hold him so that he couldn't kick. But when Ted tried to slip the bit between his teeth, he fought like the demon that he was, biting and kicking, so that he had to be thrown to his side and his head held down before the bridle could be put on him.

Then he was allowed to rise. There was no doubt but that the horse was insane with rage and fear, and several cowmen came forward and tried to persuade Ted from attempting to ride him, but Ted was as obstinate as the horse, and said that he would conquer the black, or die in the attempt.

He finally found the fellow who had been holding his saddle, although he had left his stand and was found back behind the crowd talking to a gang of young fellows, among whom Ted recognized several of Creviss' companions. This delayed and angered him, and he called the saddle-bearer down for deserting his post, and was answered with sneers and laughter.

After many trials, and the exertion of a great deal of patience, Ted got the saddle on Lucifer and hastily cinched, and as he sprang to the brute's back the ropes were loosed. With a bound and a snort of terror the black dashed forward, and it was with the greatest difficulty that Ted swung it so it went through the gates and into the arena without dashing him against the posts.

Once inside the arena, the brute began to exhibit terrible ferocity.

Stella and Bud had followed in his wake, and when the girl saw how the brute was behaving, she whispered to Bud:

"That demon will kill him yet."

"If he don't kill it," answered Bud.

"Why did you let him ride it? I got there a moment too late, and he was already in the saddle, or I should have stopped it."

"What could I do?" He had told the people he would ride it, and that settled it with him."

Lucifer was exercising all the tricks known to wild and terrified broncos when they first feel saddle and bridle, and which seem to be inbred in them. He bucked, but there was never a horse that could buck Ted off. He reared, he kicked, rolled, and fell backward. But every time he stopped for a moment to note the result, there the unshakable enemy was on his back again. Clearly he was puzzled.

Then a new paroxysm of rage would shake him, and he would go through the same performances again, but with no better success.

Suddenly Ted brought his quirt down on the brute's flanks, and it leaped high into the air in an agony of fear and pain. It had felt that stinging thing before, and hated it.

Then it started to run away from this terrible thing that bestrode its back.

"By Heaven! it's running away," muttered Bud. "It'll be an act o' Providence if Ted isn't killed."

Down the arena they dashed, Ted sitting in the saddle as if he and it and the stallion were all of a piece.

When the brute came to the arena's end, and saw before him the shouting multitude, it suddenly swerved to come back, and Ted realized that something had happened to the saddle. It was slipping, and yet he was sure he had cinched it tight. Back they came tearing again, and passed Stella and Bud like a rocket.

"Great guns!" cried Bud, "his saddle's lose. He's a goner now, shore."

Every one saw Ted's danger, for Ted was leaning well over, and the saddle was on the horse's side. A hollow groan went up.

At Bud's first words Stella was off after Ted like a shot.

The horse, as every one could now see, was trying its best to kill Ted, and many of the spectators were positive that it would do so.

Now the cinch had parted.

"The cinch has broken," the shout went up. "It will kill him, sure!" Ted was now leaning far over on the horse's side, his left leg well under the horse's belly and his foot in the stirrup, while the heel of his left boot was clinging to the edge of the tipped saddle. It was a most precarious position, for if the saddle slipped farther he would go under and be trampled and kicked to death before any one could reach him.

The powerful brute was bent on Ted's destruction and seemed about to accomplish it, when Stella galloped to his side, and, grasping his hand, held him safe.

"The cinch is off," she called to him. "I'll help you up, then kick the saddle loose."

Slowly but surely Ted worked himself up until he could release his foot from the stirrup. Then, with a sudden wrench that almost pulled Stella to the ground, he was again on top. With a kick he sent the saddle to the ground, and was riding bareback, while the brute stumbled and almost went to his knees as the saddle fell between his legs.

But now Ted took charge of the situation. With quirt and spur he drove the beast here and there, punishing it, giving it no rest, allowing it to do nothing in

its own way until it staggered and heaved and reared with fatigue and lack of breath, and yet he urged it.

"He'll kill that horse yet," said Billy Sudden.

"No, he knows what that horse will stand, and he's going to make him stand it," said Bud.

The people had never seen such riding as this, and when they realized that Ted had conquered the stallion and was now rubbing it in, they shouted until their throats cracked.

At last the horse could go no farther, and Ted let it stop, as he slipped to the ground and gave the brute a slap with his hand.

"I reckon you'll know better next time, old fellow," was all he said, and walked to where his saddle was lying.

As he raised it up, he was seen to stop and look at the cinch carefully, then hurry to where the boys were awaiting him.

"Fellows," he said solemnly, throwing the saddle on the ground, "that cinch did not break, it was cut."

A dozen of the boys leaped to the ground and examined the cinch.

It was true. The cinch had been cut almost through with a sharp knife, and the strain upon it had parted it. There could be no doubt as to what had been intended.

As Stella came riding up, she shouted:

"The cinch was cut. I saw it. Wiley Creviss did it. I didn't realize at the time what he was doing or know that it was Ted's saddle, and when I did find out, he was mounted and away."

A howl of indignation went up at this.

"Scatter out, boys, and round up Creviss," shouted Billy Sudden. "We know what to do with him when he's caught."

Ted's adventure with Lucifer ended the performances in the arena, and, as the balloon was inflated and ready to ascend, the people flocked to where it was straining at the ropes.

Ted had mounted Sultan again, and left the arena surrounded by Stella and the boys.

"Who's going up in her?" asked Ted.

"Ben Robinson, the boss," answered Ben.

"Do you know who he is?" asked Ted.

Ben stared at him without replying.

"I'll tell you," said Ted. "He's 'Skip' Riley, thief and ex-convict, the leader of the 'Flying Demons.' He is the man who caused us to lose our money last night, and who engineered all the mysterious robberies hereabouts. Do you reckon he intends to come back?"

Ben's eyes started from their sockets in surprise.

"I—I don't know," he stammered. "By Jove! we must stop him. Maybe he's going to skip."

The boys had crowded about Ted as he spoke.

"We'll have to hurry if we get him," shouted Ben. "He's in the basket now."

With shouts of warning Ted and the boys pushed their horses through the crowd, which rushed aside to let them through.

They could see "Skip" Riley lift a large tin box into the basket from the ground. As he was getting ready to start there was a shrill cry, and the midget came waddling through the crowd and climbed over the side of the car and up Riley's body until it clung to his shoulder like a monkey. A great many of the thoughtless laughed at this. They did not understand the significance of the move.

"Get ready to cut her loose," shouted Riley.

Two or three men stood by with sharp knives in their hands.

Riley saw Ted and the boys pushing rapidly through the crowd.

"Cut her loose!" shouted Riley, and the balloon shot upward, amid the shouts of the people.

"Too late," said Ben.

"Not yet," cried Ted, spurring through the crowd.

A long guide-rope was dragging from the car of the balloon.

"Follow me, Bud. The balance of you catch Creviss and the rest of them. I'm going with Riley."

Before they knew exactly what he meant, Ted grasped the guide-rope as it passed over his head, and was swung out of the saddle and dangled in the air, to the horror of the people, who expected to see him fall and be dashed to pieces at any minute, for the balloon had shot up rapidly and was now several hundred feet above the ground.

But Riley, looking over the country and taking account of the direction in which the balloon was traveling, was unaware that he had taken on another passenger.

Hand over hand Ted climbed steadily, until at last he reached the car and looked over the edge of it.

Riley's back was toward him, and noiselessly Ted slipped over the side and into the basket.

Then the midget happened to turn his head, and saw Ted and uttered a frightened cry, which brought Riley around so that he found himself looking into the cold, dark bore of Ted's .44.

"Got you!" said Ted coolly.

"How did you get here?" said Riley, trying to smile. "If I'd known that you wanted to come I'd have waited for you."

"I don't think," said Ted. "But now we'll go down."

"No, I've got to give the people a run for their money. We must go a little farther."

"I said we'd go down."

"But we can't until the gas gets cool and exhausts. I have no escape-valve."

"Then I'll shoot a hole in the bag. I guess we'll go down then."

"For Heaven's sake, don't do that! You'd blow us all to pieces."

"Then down with her. I mean what I say."

Riley looked at Ted for a moment, then pulled a string. There followed a hissing noise, and the balloon began to sink, slowly at first, then more rapidly

Ted did not dare take his eyes off Riley to see how close they were to the ground. But he heard the Moon Valley long yell, and knew that they were near the earth, and that Bud Morgan was not far away.

Suddenly the car bumped on the ground, bounced and struck again, then stopped, and Ted heard Bud's cheerful voice right behind him.

"Jumpin' sand-hills, so yer got him, eh? Come, climb out," said Bud to Riley, "we need yer on terry firmy."

"Cover him, Bud, while I search him. If he makes a break, kill him. He's an ex-convict, so don't take any chances with him," said Ted.

Riley yielded up a gun and a knife, and then he was hustled out of the car, with the midget still clinging to him, and Ted took charge of the tin box.

Billy Sudden and some of his men had come up, and so had Ben and Kit, and Riley was conducted back to the ranch-house strongly guarded.

Once inside with their prisoners and the boys, Ted closed the doors on the curious crowd. The first thing he did was to open the tin box. On top were the packages of bills stolen from the cubby-hole, and beneath it a large amount of money and the bonds taken from the Strongburg Trust Company, as well as registered letters from which the money had not yet been extracted, and a large amount of brand new treasury-notes which answered the description of the government funds stolen from Creviss' bank.

"It's all here," said Ted, "and the evidence is complete."

"But how did he manage to do it without leaving a mark or a broken lock behind him?" asked Ben.

"How? By means of this," and Ted placed his hand on the head of the midget, who shrank from him with a snarling cry.

"Still I don't understand it."

"The day I saw him in the Creviss bank he marched out with the plunder under my very eyes. The day before the robbery this fellow went into the bank with the dwarf in his valise. Wiley Creviss was alone. The valise was opened, and the dwarf slipped out of the valise and into the vault, and concealed himself.

"During the night the dwarf collected all the money and bonds he could, and made himself comfortable. When it came time for the bank to open in the morning he again concealed himself, and remained in hiding until noon, when Wiley Creviss again came on watch while the cashier went to dinner. Then Riley, here, entered with his valise, and the dwarf crept into it, and was carried out of the bank with the money."

"But what had the midget to do with the theft of our money?"

"That's simple. Farley and the dwarf were to do the job. The dwarf was sent up to the roof, for he can climb like a monkey, and came down the chimney and opened the door for Farley. That was a mistake, or they would not have been caught, except for Farley."

"How did they know where you hid the money?"

"The dwarf saw us through the window, and Kit saw him, but I thought it was all imagination. That was how they robbed the post-office. The dwarf was lowered down the chimney. That is about the size of it. Am I correct, Riley?"

"Correct enough, so far as I'm concerned. I guess it's back to 'the stir' for me. But this midget didn't know what he was doing, and ought to be sent to an asylum instead of the prison," said Riley.

At that moment there was a great commotion without, and a crowd of cowboys rode up. In the center of the circle made by them was Wiley Creviss and several of his gang. In all, with Riley and the dwarf, there were eight of them in custody, and without ado they were hurried to the Strongburg jail.

The United States marshal was in Strongburg when Ted came in with his prisoners.

"What is all this, Strong?" asked the marshal

"That bank-robbing gang you ordered me to bring in," answered Ted.

"You made quick work of it. Get any of the money?"

"All of it. It is in the Strongburg bank. You see, they made the mistake of robbing us last night. But for that they would have got away, and we would have had a hard time catching them. As it was, they walked right in to us."

"Skip" Riley went back to the penitentiary for a long term of years, and the midget was sent to an asylum for the feeble minded.

Jack Farley turned State's evidence, and Creviss and ten other young reprobates were sent to a reformatory.

As for Lucifer, he turned out, next to Sultan and Custer, the best horse on the ranch.

THE END.

The next number of the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY, No. 147, entitled "King of the Wild West's Iron Box; or, Stella Turns the Tables," relates the amusing as well as exciting adventures of Ted Strong and his comrades in their efforts to stop a leak in the government's shipments of gold from the Western mints to the Eastern banks. His services as deputy United States marshal have been suddenly called for, and when he gets into the field he finds a lot of strange and perplexing things to work out. How he does it makes one of the best stories in Ted's career.

A CHAT WITH YOU.

EDITORIAL NOTE.—The deluge of letters of praise pouring into our editorial rooms has impelled us to open this department, where, from week to week, we may meet our multitude of enthusiastic young readers and answer various questions concerning sports afield. If you desire to know anything connected with outdoor life, hunting, fishing, [illegible] or cowboy life on the plains, ask freely [illegible] who are thoroughly posted [illegible] open. In many cases we may have to abbreviate letters, but it shall be our aim to print everything that we believe must prove of interest to the great body of our readers.

SPECIAL NOTICE—Owing to the great number of letters still coming, and the unabated interest shown in connection with our cash prize competition, we have concluded to extend the time a month or two, so that every boy may have a chance. If you have up to now failed to enter your letter in the contest, there is still time to do so. We shall positively print the full name and address of every prize winner in this column, when the competition has closed.

Here is a story of a man who loved his dog so well that he almost sacrificed his life in attempting to rescue the animal from a railroad-train. Lou Sorenson, a carpenter of this place, was struck by a passing Soo train and thrown into the Heart River. The man was working out on the bridge over which the train passed when his pet dog followed its master over the trestle to the center of the structure. A few moments afterward a train approached, and the dog seemed to be stricken with fear. It stood paralyzed in the middle of the track, making no effort to jump to one side. Seeing the danger threatening his pet, Mr. Sorenson hastened to rescue the dog, and was struck by the train before he could get out of the way. He managed to push the dog to one side, and the animal escaped without a scratch, though he was not quick enough to escape injury himself. H. D.
Dickinson, Minn.

We have heard a great deal about dogs' faithful watch over human beings and their love for their masters, but here is a case where watchful care and sacrifice prompted by fidelity was reversed.

(A letter from Ontario.)

I think Ted and the boys are all right, and the stories about them are the best I ever read. I get a copy of the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY every week, and think they are grand.
JACK KENNEDY.

Always read this great weekly, and you will need no other.

(A letter from Maine.)

I think the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY is the best boys' weekly published. I have been a reader of the paper for some time, and I now take this opportunity to express my opinion of Ted Strong and his comrades. They are brave, strong, and self-reliant, and I think they are good models for the American boy to follow. GERALD LITTLEFIELD.

Here is a letter which our friends will read with pleasure, as it sums up some of the good qualities of the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY and the principal characters in its pages.

Your library, the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY, has done a whole lot for me. The character of Ted Strong, the King of the Wild West, has wrought a wondeful influence upon my own. He is such a gentleman, so manly, true, and honest, that his conduct has inspired me to try to become like him. When I am tempted to do anything that my conscience tells me is not right I think of Ted and how he would scorn me if he thought that I would be guilty of anything that he would be ashamed to hear about. I no longer tell a lie, smoke, drink, or do anything that I should not do. And all this is due to the influence of that wonderful young man, Ted Strong. I wish all young men would read the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY, so that they would come under the influence of my hero, Ted Strong. I think that it would do them a world of good. With three cheers for Ned Taylor, the author, and Street & Smith, I am a well-wisher of the greatest boys' library, the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY. PETER GANGAN.
Boston, Mass.

We wish that more of our readers who have felt the good influence of the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY would write in and tell us all about it. It is pleasing to know how a series of good, healthy boys' stories have influenced its readers and induced them to lead clean, manly lives.

Your publications are the best that I have ever read. I like the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY particularly. It gives one the best pictures of Western life of any story I have read. I like Ted Strong, Bud Morgan, Clay Whipple, and the rest of the boys.
Newark, N. J. WILLIAM BOWS.

You have selected a fine library to read when you take the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY. If you continue to read it regularly, it will not be long before you know more about the West and cowboy life than any one among your acquaintances.

I have been a regular reader of the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY now for over a year. I took the first number not knowing just what the story was going to be like. I got interested from the very first chapter. When I finished the story I said to myself that that was just the library for me, and I have been reading it ever since. I expect to read the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY as long as it is published, and I hope that it will be issued for many many years to come. Believe me a well-wisher of the greatest boys' story-book that I know of. FRANK B. B.
Greenville, S. C.

A pleased reader is always a satisfied reader. We are glad to hear that you have read the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY from the first number to the latest issue, as this indicates that you like it so well that you will not only continue to get the library, but will recommend it to all your friends.

I enjoyed reading the letters that have appeared in the Chat column of the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY for several months past. They show that the readers of this famous publication appreciate a good thing when they have it. If the stories were not what they are, people would not take the trouble to write in and say how much they liked Ted Strong and his pals. I think that he is the greatest young man that ever swung into a saddle or made a bandit throw up his hands. All my friends say that there is no hero like Ted Strong, the King of the Wild West. And I agree with them. May he always conquer his enemies, and bring bad men to justice. CLARENCE D. MORGAN.
Indianapolis, Ind.

We enter into the spirit that prompts you to hope that Ted will always conquer his enemies and bring bad men to justice. Ted has done good work in the wild districts of the West, by cleaning out the desperate characters and giving the law-abiding inhabitants a chance to attend to their affairs without being molested. And they are exceedingly grateful to the young rough rider for what he has done. Many a town has given Ted a vote of thanks for ridding its streets of a lot of roughs and toughs who terrorized the people and threatened to shoot them if they interfered with their wild escapades.

Friday is the day that I look forward to with a great deal more expectation than any other day in the week. That is the day that my newsdealer gets his supply of the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY. We boys flock to his store to get a number as soon as possible. Then each one hurries off to some secluded nook where he can read undisturbed until he has finished the story. Woe unto the boy who should intrude upon the peace and quiet of the reader at that time! It would go hard with him if he were so thoughtless

as to do such a thing as that! When we ROUGH RIDER readers are busy following the latest adventures of that great hero, Ted Strong, we do not want any one to be "butting in." After we have finished the story then they can talk as much as they like. As a matter of fact, we rather welcome our friends then, so that we can discuss with them what we have just read. That is the best way to remember what we have read about the young rough riders. When I talk about interesting things I have read they stick in my mind, and I can remember them a long time afterward. Three cheers for this wonderful weekly, of which Ted Strong is the hero. MARK SMALLS.
Detroit, Mich.

That's right, do not let any one interrupt you when engrossed in a fascinating ROUGH RIDER story. Just make your friends wait until you have finished. Tell them to get a copy of their own and put in the time with it till you are ready to discuss the story with them. When they once have been induced to do this you will never have any more trouble with restless individuals who come around when they are not wanted.

It is some time since I last wrote you about the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY. The weekly has made such an impression upon me that I cannot refrain from writing and telling you again what I think of it. In the first place, it has a reputation for containing the best stories of their kind. There is not a library dealing with cowboy life that can compare with it. The incidents in the stories are never impossible, like those found in the stories issued by publishers who try to imitate your weekly. Everything reads so natural that you always say: "This must have really happened." The hero acts as if he were a real human boy, which can't be said of the chief character in some other stories I have in mind. The Ted Strong stories are the best of any boys' stories published to-day. That is recommendation enough.
Seattle, Wash. JERRY TURNER.

There are no boys' stories treating of life on the ranch and the plains that can equal those appearing in the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY. As you have read imitations—and very weak ones at that—you are in a position to judge the relative merits of this publication and the others you have in mind when you write such an enthusiastic letter.

Your library called the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY is the best one for boys that I have ever seen. It certainly fills the bill. Wherever I go I see a copy of this famous publication in the hands of the boys. And no wonder they like it! It is the ideal publication for stories of adventure. JOSEPH HENDERSON.
Calcutta, India.

The ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY is read and appreciated away off in India, as you can see by this letter. The boys out there like to read of Ted and his wonderful deeds just as much as the boys in this country.

The other day I heard a person say that he would not read a five-cent book, as it wasn't good for him. I told him that if he had ever seen the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY he wouldn't talk like that. He sneered and said: "What is this paper you are talking about?" I told him that it was the best boys' magazine ever published, and that if he would read it he would learn a whole lot about the West, and how to be manly and honest, like the hero, Ted Strong. He did not like what I said to him, and did not do what I said.

But a week afterward, when he thought that I had forgotten what I said to him, he crept behind our barn one afternoon with a copy of the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY which I had left in the wagon-seat. I came up unexpectedly and found him reading. I did not let him know that I saw him, and left him alone. Next week when I went to the store to buy the latest issue I found him there, having just bought one. I asked what he was doing that for, and he said that he wanted to see just what was in the library. He tried to make out that he knew nothing about it, but I had seen him smile to himself the day he was reading behind our barn, so I was sure that he had enjoyed the story, though he did not want to admit that he liked the library. I did not say anything, but waited. The next day one of the other boys told me that James Bunker—that was his name—admitted that the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY was the best that he had ever read in his life, and that he intended to take it every week.
Rochester, N. Y. JAMES D. S. WILDER.

It is interesting to know that your friend, who was inclined to scoff at the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY at first, has become one of its strongest adherents. He acted the way he did because he did not know anything about the paper. It is easy to sneer at anything we know nothing about, and a great many of us judge things in just this unfair way. Let the most skeptical reader who does not know anything about the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY go through a copy and he will want to take it for ever afterward.

There is something magical about the name of your best-known library. The name ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY carries one to the broad expanse of the Western plains, and into the hills of the gold-mines, on the ranch, and among the cowboys. There is an air of reality about these stories which appeals to every reader of the weekly. This is the reason why it has become so popular in such a remarkably short time. Let me congratulate the publishers upon their enterprise in putting before the reading public a library which instantly became the favorite of the young men in this country. FRANCIS STUART.
Brooklyn, N. Y.

The ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY does all that you say it does. Its powers of attraction are something wonderful. It has influenced all kinds and degrees of people. Young men and old men, even girls and women write in telling how much they like the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY. You have added your share of praise, and we are glad to include your letter among those which will interest our readers, and show them that the influence of this publication is far-reaching.

I am a young lawyer, and wish to tell you how the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY appeals to a professional man. To me the reading of this publication acts as a relaxation after hard mental work. I just like to pick up something which carries me on without any effort. I do not seek a story which is obscure and puzzling when I am suffering from brain fag, but want a good interesting yarn full of action and lively incidents. This is the reason I got into the habit of reading these wonderful boys' stories. There is nothing improbable in them, and they seem to breathe the spirit of the great West. The air of truth, which pervades all these stories, gives them a charm to both old and young readers. The author writes about life in the West, and on the ranches, as if he were thoroughly familiar with what he describes. I think that I can make a safe guess that Mr. Ted Naylor was a cowboy himself at one time. No one but a person who had been all through it could write of the intimate life of the cowboy country the way he does. I shall continue to read your ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY as long as Mr. Ned Taylor writes the stories.
Staten Island, New York. HENRY B. WILLIAMSON.

The qualities you have mentioned are just those which have made the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY what it is. The author has caught the "atmosphere," as the critics say in judging favorably a successful work of fiction; and it is this that our readers recognized. They felt it, though sometimes they did not exactly know what the powerful attraction of these stories was called, and continued to read the library because they were sure that they were getting true pictures of a kind of life little known through actual contact by most of us, but made intensely fascinating by the glamour of romance which has been cast over it by the magic pen of the author. He has the faculty of getting at the spirit of the life he writes about, and presenting it in pictures which are vivid and lifelike in their fidelity to the conditions he portrays. Have no fear of any one else but Ned Taylor writing these stories. This brilliant author has been procured at considerable expense to supply a story of cowboy life each week, and our readers may rest assured that they are reading stories written by a real cowboy who has gone through many of the adventures he incorporates in the romances.

THE ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY

ISSUED EVERY MONDAY. **HANDSOME COLORED COVER**

Ted Strong wants to make your acquaintance, boys, and we are convinced that you will be proud to have him as a friend. The tales of his adventures among the cowboys are full of fascinating interest. He is known to every one as "King of the Wild West" and he upholds the title.

PRICE FIVE CENTS PER COPY

For sale by all newsdealers, or sent, postpaid, by the publishers upon receipt of price in money or postage stamps

HERE ARE THE LATEST TITLES:

124—King of the Wild West's Helping Hand; or, Stella, the Girl Range-rider.
125—King of the Wild West's Buckskin Guide; or, Stella at the Grand Round-up.
126—King of the Wild West's Strategy; or, Stella's Trick Pony.
127—King of the Wild West's Tangled Trail; or, The Disappearance of Stella.
128—King of the Wild West's Long Ride; or, Stella Lost on the Red Mesa.
129—King of the Wild West's Phantom; or, Stella in Danger.
130—King of the Wild West's Broncho-busters; or, Stella's Fort in the Coulée.
131—King of the Wild West's Corral; or, How Stella Brought the Warning.
132—King of the Wild West's Tenderfoot Pard; or, Stella's Surprise Party.
133—King of the Wild West's Night Wrangler; or, What Happened to Stella.
134—King of the Wild West's Outlaw; or, Stella to the Rescue.
135—King of the Wild West at the Throttle; or, Stella in the Flames.
136—King of the Wild West's Trail; or, Stella Finds Bill Blue.
137—King of the Wild West's Race; or, Stella Among the Seris.
138—King of the Wild West's Fire-signal; or, How Stella Foiled the Marauders.
139—King of the Wild West Rides the Line; or, Stella Saves Old Glory.
140—King of the Wild West's Treasure; or, Stella on the Walls of Montezuma.
141—King of the Wild West's Totem; or, Stella Makes a New Maxim.
142—King of the Wild West on the Box; or, Stella in the Mountains.
143—King of the Wild West's Slick Trick; or, Stella Buys a Town.
144—King of the Wild West on Vanishing Island; or, Stella Solves an Enigma.
145—King of the Wild West's Decision; or, Stella's Waif of the Plains.
146—King of the Wild West's Broken Cinch; or, Stella's Stratagem.
147—King of the Wild West's Iron Box; or, Stella Turns the Tables.
148—King of the Wild West's Lost Brand; or, Stella in "No Man's Land."
149—King of the Wild West's Snow Camp; or, Stella Lost in the Wilderness.

IF YOU WANT ANY BACK NUMBERS of our libraries and cannot procure them from newsdealers, they can be obtained from this office direct. Cut out and fill in the following order blank and send it to us with the price of the books you want and we will send them to you by return mail. **POSTAGE STAMPS TAKEN THE SAME AS MONEY.**

STREET & SMITH, Publishers, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York City. 190

Gentlemen:—Enclosed find.....cents for which please send me:

.....copies of TIP TOP Nos..... .....copies of BUFFALO BILL Nos.....
..... " "NICK CARTER Nos..... ..... " "BRAVE AND BOLD Nos.....
..... " "DIAMOND DICK Nos..... ..... " "ROUGH RIDER Nos.....

Name.....Street and No.....Town.....State.....

THE FAVORITE LIST
OF FIVE-CENT LIBRARIES

Rough Rider Weekly

Ted Strong was appointed deputy marshal by accident, but he resolves to use his authority and rid his ranch of some very tough bullies. He does it in such a slick way that everyone calls him "King of the Wild West" and he certainly deserves his title. $100 in cash are given to the readers of this publication, every three months. Buy a copy and learn how to come in for a share of it.

MIGHT AND MAIN

These are stories of the adventures of boys who succeeded in climbing the ladder of fame by honest effort. No more interesting tales can be imagined. Each number is at least one-third longer than the ordinary five-cent library.

DIAMOND DICK WEEKLY

The demand for stirring stories of Western adventure is admirably filled by this library. Every up-to-date boy ought to read just how law and order are established and maintained on our Western plains by Diamond Dick, Bertie, and Handsome Harry.

BUFFALO BILL STORIES

Buffalo Bill is the hero of a thousand exciting adventures among the Redskins. These are given to our boys only in the Buffalo Bill Stories. They are bound to interest and please you.

NICK CARTER WEEKLY

We know, boys, that there is no need of introducing to you Nicholas Carter, the greatest sleuth that ever lived. Every number containing the adventures of Nick Carter has a peculiar, but delightful, power of fascination.

BRAVE AND BOLD

Every boy who prefers variety in his reading matter, ought to be a reader of Brave and Bold. All these were written by authors who are past masters in the art of telling boys' stories. Every tale is complete in itself.

BOWERY BOY LIBRARY

The adventures of a poor waif whose only name is "Bowery Billy." Billy is the true product of the streets of New York. No boy can read the tales of his trials without imbibing some of that resource and courage that makes the character of this homeless boy stand out so prominently.

The Tip Top Weekly

Frank Merriwell and his brother Dick are known and loved by over one hundred and fifty thousand of the best boys in the United States. They are both clean-cut, vigorous fellows who dare to do right no matter what the consequences. Get the current number. We are sure you will like it.